The Road to Public Art
Move Your Work Beyond the Studio

by Louise Buyo

When people think of public art, they typically envision a spectrum of sculpture with enormous, conceptual works on one end and perhaps smaller, more traditional memorials with realistic bronze statues on the other end. But the realm of public art is vibrant and diverse, and it is much more than just sculpture. Every year in the U.S., there are thousands of public art projects, ranging in size, budget, scope and media in a variety of indoor and outdoor spaces. Local, regional and national agencies put out calls to artists, looking to commission designs for everything under the sun, including storm drain covers, murals, flooring, windows, benches, railings, signs, columns, etc.

If you are an artist who works primarily in two-dimensional or nontraditional media, this world can seem very removed from your usual creative process. Perhaps you've thought about submitting an application to a public art opportunity, but were unsure about how to go about it. Or maybe you've been too intimidated to try because, up to this point, your career has been focused on your studio practice.

The truth is that art councils, committees and panels are constantly on the lookout for talented artists with the ability to manage a project and execute a vision, and they're eager to expand their pool of qualified applicants. They're looking for artists they haven't worked with before, even those who may be new to public art, but they won't know you're out there unless you apply.

Getting Started

How do you know if you're right for public art? Ask yourself these questions: Do you enjoy taking initiative? Do you handle rejection well? Are you excited about sharing your artistic vision with others and working on collaborative projects? Are you able to compromise? Are you highly organized? Do you have a great deal of tenacity and patience? Artists with these traits have what it takes to succeed in this field.

Landscape photographer Peter de Lory from Seattle, Washington, began his career as an artist in the late '60s. In the '80s, he began adding public works to his repertoire. For De Lory, whose public work is concerned with the both natural and man-made environments, the transition was a result of his excitement about the increasing availability of options for transferring the photographic image to new materials, moving beyond the confines of simply enlarging work on paper to rendering images on more novel surfaces such as enamel, glass, tile or metal.

De Lory's earliest projects were enlargements of his photographs arranged together into very long framed pieces. "At one point, I was doing the large [framed works], and the idea occurred to me to make photographic images a part of the public venue," says De Lory, explaining his strong desire to not just feature his images but build them directly into the sites. "At the time, I didn't know how to do that. I didn't have the means, but recently, especially in the last 15 years, there are opportunities with transforming the photographic image into other materials with greater integrity to the image."

Despite exploring his artwork through these mosaic works, De Lory's own photography is still very much the center of his approach to public art.

"I'm an outsider in the sense that very few people use photography in this way," he says. "When I go after a project, I am the photographer. I'm not borrowing an image from somebody. I make the images, and that's very unusual because most artists appropriate photographs."

Until you get started sending applications and get awarded a commission, you're going to be an outsider, too, by default. For artists hoping to get their foot in the door, Ed Carpenter, a public artist who has worked in the field for 37 years, has this advice:

"Even if would-be public artists don't have commissions, they can still advance their thinking in regard to public art by doing hypothetical commissions. They can find sites that excite them for some reason. They need to find sites, either interior or

To realize his vision of the mosaic *Champion*, one of nine artist columns commissioned for the Sea-Tac Airport, De Lory worked closely with Italian artisans who prepared glass and marble tiles by hand.

exterior, where they think the site would be enhanced, improved, made more interesting or more exciting by a work of public art. And then they can design work for it. Do computer simulations, do photo montages, and try two or three different schemes or even 10 different schemes in a site and look at it from different viewpoints. Do hypothetical commissions. There are a couple of different values to that. One is that it helps develop thinking in regard to public art and it helps you be more critical of existing public art and to begin to form ideas about the direction that you might want to go. The other thing it does is begin to build a portfolio of work that can help get public art commissions. Of course, I would advise starting small. If you're beginning to go after public art commissions, start with the low budget ones because there is less competition for those and you're more likely to have less experienced artists competing for them. But even hypothetical works can help in competing for one's first few public commissions."

Even when translated into other materials, De Lory's photographs will always be the heart of his creative process. His image of the world's tallest Western Red Cedar is the basis for *Champion*.

A Different Approach to Making Art

While there are major differences between studio work and the public art process, the two worlds are not as separate as you might think. Successful public artists come to the field from every type of background: painters, potters, sculptors, fiber artists, architects, digital arts, etc. A great number are studio artists who have decided to expand their practice to include larger spaces and audiences. Still others are artists with no formal education in art and who learned their trade through apprenticeships and on site training, like Carpenter, who has been making hundreds of large-scale public installations since 1973.

"Studio work and public art are very different in a number of ways," states Carpenter. "The primary way is that public art has a site, which is stands in judgement of the work forever. The site, and its physical, emotional and historical attributes, need to be addressed. If they're not properly addressed, then a work, no matter how dramatic, will not be successful."

De Lory agrees with Carpenter that work created in the studio is aesthetically "more private and inclusive" than public art *because* of its more intimate relationship with the individual viewer, but emphasizes that work in public venues must be as conceptually sound because it touches so many people.

"In its location in the airport, [my tiled pillar] *Champion* has been seen by hundreds of thousands of people. That is a whole different world. The piece itself has to hold up as good as my work in the gallery, if not better," says De Lory.

There is room to approach public art in different ways. It is perfectly acceptable to view public art as an opportunity to explore variations of your studio work on a bigger scale. Other artists choose to view their public pieces as something different entirely, keeping the two spheres separate as practices.

When Carter Hodgkin, an abstract painter whose work is a collision of traditional techniques, science and digital new media, was invited to submit a proposal for public art commission at Remsen Hall at Queens College in New York, she was initially shocked. She had never considered working in public art before, but the more she thought about it, the more she became excited. She went to her first meeting in December, and by the end of February, she had prepared her presentation for *Electromagnetic Fall*. Hodgkin's design was accepted, completed and even went on to be shortlisted as one of the top 40 public art projects of 2009-2010 by Americans for the Arts.

"It was the possibility of working on a large scale [that convinced me]," explains Hodgkin. "Also, I really love mosaic. I saw immediately that would be the perfect translation for what I'm

doing. Conceptually, it's perfect because I'm dealing with pixels in my work. So translating a pixel into a small tile was a no-brainer for me. It really works with what I'm doing. I'm using the grid, and I'm using a very logical, systematic approach. It just totally fits mosaic."

Although public art requires you to think on a different scale and within a whole new set of parameters, your public art should be a consistent extension of your overall aesthetic. To accomplish this, you must find the elements in your studio art that can be translated into this new platform. You want to explore those themes that are already significant to you in your public works so that each piece feels like a natural evolution. For example, if you are interested in the repetition of shapes, bold colors or graphic lines, incorporate these elements into your projects.

Inspired by physics and the digital programs in her paintings (see *Oopsidaisy* above) and prints, Carter Hodgkin continues to explore these themes in her public work.

Choosing the right material is a also big part of that process. You have to be comfortable with the medium that you choose, and it must be durable, such as glass, metal or tile. Research available techniques — like waterjet cutting, chemical etching, sandblasting, patina — so that you are able to speak competently about them and make design decisions, especially if you are working with subcontractors or fabricators (see *Working with Fabricators*, pages 20 to 22).

"Materials have opened up over the years," says De Lory. "Mosaic is a great material. I don't know how to do it myself, but there are people who can in Italy and the United States … And I'm looking for other different possibilities of placing images on the surface of other different materials … I had no problem translating my studio process into a public art process. I did a project in Washington with another artist Kay Kirkpatrick, a sculptor. We photographed Wenatchee, which is a little town near here with fruit orchards. We made large murals for the convention center and created this matrix of sculpture and images. I tried, even indoors, to use materials that will hold up and have a life of at least 10 to 30 years. These were mounted on aluminum, which is very sturdy, and then coated.

"For *Champion*, the more recent column piece of the tree, the transition was very easy because the image was in black and white. I met with the mosaic people, and we discussed how large they could make the material and the piece and see if was going to be doable. It was. I worked well with them. They used their craft and knowledge of material to interpret my image. So I let them figure that out. Some things will work very well. I'm sure there are many things that won't. But I'm always on the lookout for different materials to put photographs on."

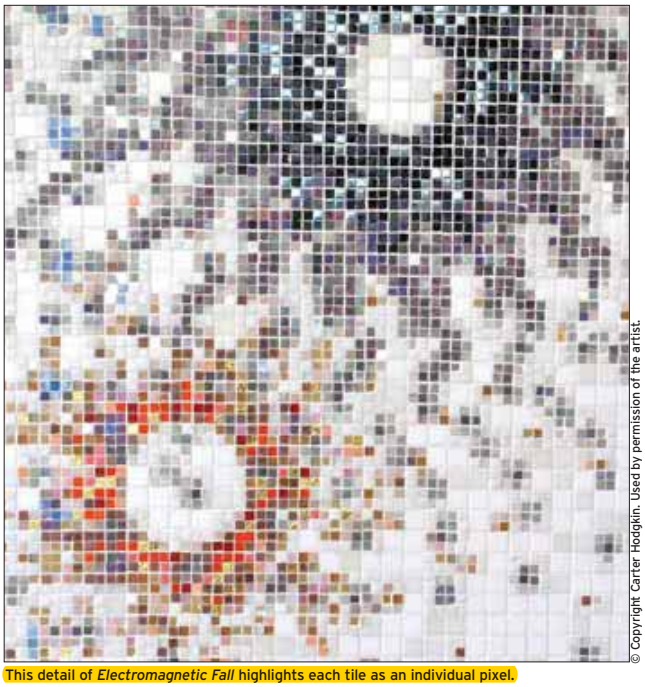
Must Play Well with Others

Public art is a nexus of many different types of people with varying perspectives and communities with various interests and agendas. It's safe to say that if you are the type of person who prefers working alone, then the field of public art is probably not for you. To realize a project, it is likely that you will have to work in collaboration with fellow artists, architects, tradesmen, artisans and other art professionals. You may be wholly dependent on the work of other people during certain stages: fabricators, subcontractors, arts agencies, etc. To handle this aspect of a project, you must be able to communicate your vision while listening to and accepting the opinions of others. Flexibility is key. There will be a great deal of phone calls, meetings, paperwork, and back and forth. Every person you come in contact with is someone who is helping to build your reputation. So it is important to foster good relationships with the people you work with.

"It's important to value these relationships,"

Public artist Ed Carpenter begins his large-scale sculptures as sketches, schematics, computer renderings and models, such as this competition proposal of *Nashquatch* for Nashville, Tennessee.

Electromagnetic Fall, a mosaic consisting of 55,162 pieces, spans three floors of Remsen Hall at Queen's College. Based on subatomic collision, the work depicts the colliding nucleus and falling particles. It is a fitting complement to the newly renovated chemistry and research labs.



This detail of *Electromagnetic Fall* highlights each tile as an individual pixel.

emphasizes Carpenter. "They are your colleagues as well people you've hired. It is important to pay them decently and on time, and to treat them with respect because they are essential members of the team. I have a full-time office manager and an architect. Then I work with a number of consultants that I've worked with for a long time — structural consultants, lighting consultants and a variety of subcontractors. I couldn't possibly operate without them."

Look Critically at Calls to Artists

Not all public art opportunities will be the right fit for your aesthetic, and it is unlikely that you'll be eligible for every competition, award or grant. In the beginning, you probably don't want to respond to RFQ's for projects with $150,000 budgets. As with most things in life, start by tackling smaller projects first and then progressively work your way up to the larger ones as you prove yourself.

"I look for calls dealing with new media and digital work. I think my work fits into something like that especially," states Hodgkin.

In addition to determining how your art will fit the project, De Lory points out that the budgets need to be seriously examined as well.

"The budget the organization puts out also needs to be realistic," states De Lory. "Choosing [an appropriate project] is kind of difficult. Anytime you do a call, you have to be able to visualize a place and know you can realize it and make a living. I'm not the kind of person to apply to opportunities in a blanket way. I don't find that to be successful or satisfying. You don't want to get into the position where you create work you don't care about."

As an artist with little to no experience, your proposal and presentation will be careful scrutinized in regards to how you choose to approach a project. Typically, the first stage of a public art opportunity begins with a call for artists stating a request for qualifications (or RFQ). In your application, you must prove that you are worth considering as a choice by giving evidence of your professionalism: a portfolio of past work (not necessarily public art), resume, cover letter, etc. Your cover letter should be well-written and clear, stating your interest in the project and touching upon your ideas even if they are not fully formed. You don't want to be disqualified because your application is incomplete, you didn't include quality images, you missed the deadline or you didn't follow instructions. If selected, you'll move on to the next stage and be given a fee to create a proposal. When you submit the proposal, you will be expected to have a realized concept and be able to go into great detail about material and budget as well as

create a scale model, rendering or drawing of your concept.

Visions, Issues and Concerns

Convincing a committee you can build bigger works is just a small part of the battle. The real struggle is conceiving worthwhile ideas to execute, with the ultimate goal of creating work that is meaningful to society. With nearly 40 years of experience, Carpenter tells artists looking to enter the realm of public art:

"Look carefully at the existing public art and be very critical of it. Don't assume because it exists that it's successful. Be willing to ask hard questions about existing public art and analyze it. Ask yourself, 'How is it functioning in this site? Is it functioning properly or improperly? Do I consider it to be successful? If so, what are they ways in which it is successful and what are the ways in which it is unsuccessful?' Some of those are very simple, practical answers and some are much more abstract."

Jumping In

If you choose to pursue them, public art commissions can provide significant opportunities for almost any kind of artist, both in terms of income and artistic exploration. Working in this field will expand your skill set, honing your ability to work on a larger scale and improving your understanding of the business of art. It is a field that will challenge you, not only to win competitions, grants and commisions, but also to come up with better ideas and more ambitious plans of action. In addition, it can be a path to greater professional development and open the doors to more prestigious avenues. It behooves every artist, regardless of the medium, to consider adding these types of projects to their artistic practice. **AC**

The grandson of a painter/sculptor and stepson of an architect, Carpenter fuses engineering with color and form in works like *Silver Thaw,* situated at Redmond, Washington City Hall.

More Resources

Seattle's Office of Arts & Cultural Affairs has a wonderful video of their workshop, *Public Art in Two Dimensions*, available on their Web site: **www.seattle.gov/arts/publicart/workshops.asp**. Geared toward painters, printmakers and photographers who are considering the leap to public art, three artists with experience in the field share their insights as well as answer questions from the audience.

A former art consultant and curatorial assistant, Louise Buyo is the assistant editor of Art Calendar. *To see a portfolio of her writing, visit her Web site at www.LouiseBuyo.com. Louise can be reached at LBuyo@ArtCalendar.com.*