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Monica Yant Kinney: A high-energy welcome

Mural Arts has a bravura plan to spiff up the airport.

By Monica Yant Kinney

Inquirer Columnist

If you live here, you probably never think about the lousy job Philadelphia does at introducing itself. Unless, of course, you're a bureaucrat stuck in traffic on I-95 near the airport, surrounded by ugly concrete parking garages.

Such an inhospitable sight for such a welcoming city, thought Philadelphia's deputy mayor for transportation, Rina Cutler.

Residents, tourists, and those just whizzing by deserve a more appealing greeting, she reasoned. Great cities ought to have great gateways.

So Cutler called Jane Golden, Philadelphia's public-art champion, who'd been mulling the same idea.

Together, following the vision of local photographer Jacques-Jean "JJ" Tiziou, the nation's largest mural program set out to erect one of the world's largest murals. Rarely has a roving PennDot crew inspired such an ambitious undertaking at such an unlikely spot.

The two-year project, which I plan to chronicle, will span a half-mile of garage facade, cost \$225,000, and include a documentary film, a permanent art exhibit inside the airport, and satellite murals across town. It will also employ up to 50 people, kids to ex-cons.

And yet, in keeping with the city's otherwise understated style, the herculean effort is dubbed, simply enough, "How Philly Moves."

It's a sign of the Mural Arts Program's success that it takes a mega-stunt to generate this much buzz. After 25 years of installing neighborhood masterpieces for the art-starved masses, Golden finally has time to leave her mark along the city's rough edges.

Nearly a decade ago, when I cowrote a book about the mural program, "A Peaceable Kingdom" (an animal menagerie on the Schuylkill Expressway near the zoo) and "Philadelphia on a Half-Tank" (Paul Santoleri's delightful diversion at the Sunoco Refinery) were the closest things the city had to an artistic *hello* or *goodbye*.

Truth be told, most of the gasps heard driving into Center City from the airport are directed at the metal mountain just over the Platt Bridge. Only that's not art. It's a scrap-recycling plant.

Cutler, Golden, and Tiziou aim to change that with "How Philly Moves," a larger-than-life celebration of the city's dance community.

"Movement is life and that energy is contagious," said Tiziou, 29. "Hopefully, this project will show that everybody can dance, that everybody is photogenic."

The airport mural dwarfs all 3,000 that came before it in size, ambition, and logistical quagmires.

Tiziou's unusual canvas stretches 50,000 square feet. The seven-story walls aren't flat. The garages have five-feet

Don't look just yet - this is just the artist's concept - but it's pretty much how the garages at the airport will appear to Philadelphia-bound travelers when "How Philly Moves" is finished.

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gaps between floors. The lowest levels are unusable.

"Anything painted on the first floors," Tiziou said, "would only be visible to the guy working at Avis."

Tiziou, a 2002 Penn grad, conceived the complicated 3-D design on Google SketchUp. His crew will paint the entire surface black, then layer panoramic images of real people whirling, twirling, and tapping.

Ballet and belly, hula to hip-hop, he aims to give locals of all ages, body types, and skills a shot at roadside immortality. (Dancers who would like to be photographed must apply in advance by Feb. 19 at www.howphillymoves.org.)

Funded by the airport, the Philadelphia Parking Authority, USAirways, and Bank of America, the project wisely involves no city money. Due to cost constraints, it will span only terminals C, D, E, and F for now. (Golden, a tireless fund-raiser, is plotting ways to pay to paint the rest. So is Cutler, who calls the mural "the most important thing I've done in 25 years in government.")

As for the artist? Tiziou's "head explodes" thinking that he'll be responsible for the city's new first impression. It's easier to focus on inspiring spectators to lose their inhibitions and groove.

"Because no matter how bad things get, you can always dance."

Contact Monica Yant Kinney at myant@phillynews.com or 215-854-4670. Read her recent work at <http://go.philly.com/yantkinney>.

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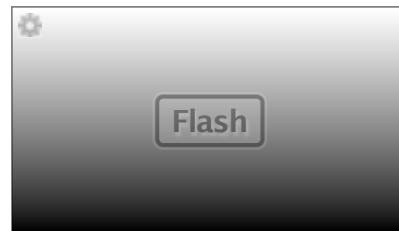
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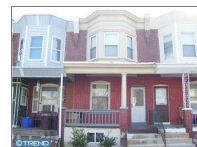
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