

Once Hidden Artists Now Become Public

Camden, NJ

By Loan Nguyen

“This is the beginning of our identity.” Donald Williams, an educator-artist for over 20 years in Camden, describes the A New View Art Installation as an artistic reimagination of Camden. The 6 short-term public art installations, aptly titled, “A New View - Camden”, are challenging community members and visitors to see the city with more dimension. If you weren't paying close attention, the artwork that took years to plan appeared to have sprouted overnight this past summer, with unusual and experimental shapes and objects that became part of the cityscape. Some might have even stopped traffic.

Camden was 1 out of 5 cities selected from a pool of more than 200 applicants, to receive a 2018 Bloomberg Philanthropies Public Art Challenge Grant. This multi-site public art project is the first of its kind to come out of the city. Never before has Camden been home to a public art installation at this scale, and with this breadth of community involvement. “A New View” was conceived and created by The City of Camden, Camden Community Partnership, Rutgers Camden Center for the Arts, Camden Fireworks and 2 independent art curators. This project team issued a call for artists to submit ideas for the 6 installation sites that were at “a scale commensurate with outdoor sites, using materials, spaces, and time in a transformative way to reinforce the perception of the city as a place of creative possibility.” The team received 131 applications from artists from around the world and In November 2019 invited 25 finalists to present their ideas before the curators and the community at a public presentation held at Rutgers Camden. Out of 131 applicants, 2 artists with direct ties to the City of Camden, Tom Marchetty and Erik James Montgomery, were finalists and ultimately contributed to the project with their own exhibitions, alongside the 6 artists chosen. Once final selections were made, the project team went to work recruiting local artists to serve as apprentices with the goal being to professionalize Camden-based artists, who could build the skills necessary to be selected for large scaled projects like this in the future.

Camden needed a cadre of artists and community partners to support the development of each of the installations. Funded through the support of Subaru of America, the “A New View” Artist Apprenticeship Program was an initiative in response to this need, that brought artists with a connection to Camden together to work with the visiting artists selected to lead the 6 public installations. Apprentices were recruited regardless of education background, as long as they had some experience in painting, design, building/construction, use of basic tools, working with clay and most importantly, an “enthusiasm, energy and interest in improving Camden.”

Why the Apprenticeship Program?

While none of the final artists selected for the installations were from Camden, the local Apprentices saw their own involvement as the representation they wanted to see. It was a collaborative opportunity to have their skills stretched while getting to work alongside artists they could learn from. Established artist and “A New View” independent art curator, Kimberly Kamp, clarified that being an “Apprentice” doesn’t mean you’re just starting out but that it means you’re learning from a master” and this project attracted masters in their creative fields to come to Camden.

Brein Garcia, an Apprentice and Camden resident reflected, “it’s still an opportunity for us. It opens us up to more opportunities for conversation with the artists and see what they went through to come up with these ideas, . . . why they found it important to come to Camden, and that relationship helps both sides. ” As for Adriana Chacon , another Camden Apprentice who is a self-taught painter, shared that she signed up because she “wanted to take her art more seriously.”

Priscilla Rios, also a painter, joined because she wanted “ to build muscles”, after being inactive during the COVID lockdown. The installations required physical labor, working with materials like steel, bamboo and clay, far from what she was used to when sitting in front of a computer screen or blank canvas. As a Camden native, Priscilla wanted to find ways to have herself reflected in the art to make it meaningful. The opportunity to do so came when she was able to add her original art to complement “Touching the

Earth,” an adobe sculpture installation on Erie St in North Camden. Together, with help from “Touching the Earth” artist Josh Sarantitis and an assistant from the “A New View” project team, her original mural “Lanternfly Bug,” was put on the wall adjacent to the site. She said, “My biggest statement was my mural. Yeah, it's cool. You know, I felt like such a small bedroom artist, and I was like, wow, like finally, a camden resident was able to partake in the beauty of collaborating. ” She wants to remind other artists to put themselves out there and just ask, that “your statement can come true.”

Similar to Priscilla, LaRodge Johnson, an incoming Photography and Marketing student at Rutgers was previously working alone, and didn't think she could do it in community with others. Through this apprenticeship she said she built the confidence to network and talk with other artists to discover new opportunities together.

Many of the Apprentices described expanding their network as the biggest benefit of the program, leading them to new insights about their artistic development.

The Message of the Art

Many of the Apprentices who are living and/or working in Camden, witness first hand the impacts of illegal dumping, seeing it as part of their view while walking in the city or while accessing the surrounding nature and animal life. These public art installations deliver an in-your-face message that gets at a dimension of the illegal dumping problem. Many of them expressed how bringing awareness to the problem is most important before any action or change could be taken. Some of the pieces that resonated for them included “Mechan 11,” a steel robot with a big heart, picking up discarded equipment and tools, like an old washing machine and other electronics. As Larodge put it, “if you don't see art around you, it can't inspire you.” She thinks “people just need a jolt, a reminder of what else is going on around us.”

Out of the public art process, something has been created that wasn't previously there and whether or not the message of illegal dumping lands on all Camden residents, some of the Apprentices think the beauty, in of the art itself, can preserve or honor the physical environments of Camden. As Donald puts it, “ I think when they (the community) see art in that area, the tendency is to keep it as is, to preserve it. So that

right there, it's like having a security guard, a beautiful, odd shaped looking security guard.”

New Skills and Confidence That Lead to Opportunity

Many of the Apprentices expressed not knowing how to get connected with the Camden art community until this opportunity arrived. They enjoyed the collective goal of achieving something together while getting the chance to put forward their individual ideas. For Brein, the apprenticeship brought a camaraderie that instilled a healthy and motivated mindset that he will continue to bring to his own work as a musician and environmentalist. “At work, you could tell everybody wanted to be there, there was no one who didn't want to be there. “

It was also a space to explore new interests. Apprentices were exposed to new media and artistic processes, even for a veteran artist like Donald: “I was able to do something I'd never done before at ‘Touching the Earth,’ I was able to do a large sculpture.” He typically sketches with colored pencils and charcoal, and gravitates towards portraying people in his art, with a current goal of sketching 10,000 portraits (with 9000 left to go). After several decades being an artist and educator in Camden, this apprenticeship reminded him that “you never stop learning, that you've never arrived anywhere and you know that you're going to keep going.” For LaRodge, the sense of pride she felt from working on this project elevated her sense of self. She cites this experience strengthened her college application to Rutgers and connected her with a new internship opportunity with “A New View” curator, Kimberly Camp. She has future plans to start a photography club with fellow students and hopes to showcase her photographs in her school one day so young people can see there are creative career paths they could potentially follow, too.

Growing an Artist Community in Camden

“A New View” curators, Judith Tennenbaum and Kimberly Kamp, who have decades of experience with both private and public large scale art, hope that with any successful public art like “A New View”, it could stimulate or serve as a springboard for more projects to come. Kimberly emphasizes the importance of maintaining the energy and

excitement generated by this project beyond its temporary nature, so that Camden can attract broader, more consistent investment in the Arts. She said, there is a “strong need for continuity for anything to have meaning. When there is that kind of commitment, Camden can plan for a vision with dynamism rather than planning for survival. “

Many of the apprentices are inspired to continue cultivating a community of Camden artists after this apprenticeship is over. Adriana believes as an artist, she can “have a louder voice” and make a big statement about other issues that are uncomfortable to confront or discuss, that other neighborhoods in Camden might care about. From this experience, many of the Apprentices believe more can be done, and feel Camden is finally being seen and recognized. Priscilla says, “we don't need to search outwards to find beauty in Camden, there are many great artists here” who can continue to carry the torch.

Donald hopes the cohort of Apprentices can keep growing and can all come together like the days of the Harlem Renaissance, where this was a rich exchange of ideas and new approaches. He wants to be part of challenging peoples' vision of Camden, “where there is an overflow of murals and art coming out of the city, where people want to tour the city to see the incredible art. That's a good vision.”

“A New View” and its multi-site, temporary installations were closed on October 31, 2021. For more details and information on the project, visit <http://www.anewviewcamden.com/visit.html>

NOTES -

Themes

- Identity . We had been living in the same neighborhood,
 - Individual stories and connections/lack of connections
 - What the Apprenticeship Program Taught Them
 - To ask for what they want
 - to have a louder voice
 - learning to network and build relationships
 - new ways to access the artist community
 - how to make art and a statement more visible and in front of people
 - learning how to use activism in art
 - What this does for the artist community - a sense of belonging and connected ness
 - gives one a sense of confidence and pride, to enter into conversations with other artists, to access newfound resources or contacts
 - pride in the city
 - an open conversation to what else more can we do to serve other parts of camden
 - what are small ways to continue to take action on the problems we see in our community
- Always wanted to connect with the community, and “Camden has been needing something like this for quite some time, and it's been needing some type of awareness, something to help people open up their eyes to their

environment and, and what's, what's really gone. To communicate with the community

Future of Camden

- these are kind of kick-starting things that we can really start doing for the next couple of years. And so to me it means a lot because as an, again, as an artist, it's like, you just don't see these things, you get to be a part of it.

Two driving questions that lingered after the conversation with some of the apprentices, is 1) reimagining a more beautiful Camden can be the tool to raise awareness of issues to inspire action in other neighborhoods. The art installation covers the core commercial corridor, but how do we make people care about the art, as much as we as artists find it beautiful and love it. Priscilla continues to think about the art, "How do you think these art pieces are actually helping Camden? The other people that just don't have that same kind of point of view about the art and how are they being met as well?

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2) The second question was posed by Adriana, Beautifying Camden, protects and preserves the community, while sending a message how will the direction of Camden developing, beautifying affect gentrification, will it make people feel threatened for their homes

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Future

Adriana thinks Camden has room for maturity, in comparison to Philly, where they might see all the artists being, already developed and industrialized. Camden has room for growth and is improving. Liked that the apprenticeship program there was always support and help with every new process. Why aren't there more artists - it's about opportunities and network

Camden will get there, making Camden beautiful is progress

How do we make Camden a place we're proud of living around

- Suppose we have an overflow of murals of art coming to the city of Camden. But we have that to the point that we have not neuros and art, where we can take tours all around the city of Camden to see all these different, incredible art, suppose our city's name known for, uh, the biggest environmental art display in the whole country. What that's, that's nice. That's a good vision.
- Imagine if we start putting a face that that's it. That one's the Dumor award. All the other city has won and continues to produce these incredible artists. Uh, uh, that should be, that could be our new identity. - Donald
- I hope it keeps growing, from eight artists, but we had 10, 20, 30, 40 artists in the city, all doing all these different things. we all come back and we all keep, uh, doing like back in the day when they had the Harlem Renaissance, when all those sculptures writers, poets, visual artists got together. When you meet James Baldwin, um, uh, Langston Hughes and, uh, Claude. Oh my God. I can't think of all these Lorraine Hansberry
- Donald will be doing something new - a mural - with other muralists from philly and maybe some kids
- Larodge recently got into grad school for photography and marketing, with the help of a reference letter from the Project Manager of a new view, ahead of her is a personal mission to bring the art of photography as a career into schools and start a photography club so students can see other career avenues aside from traditional ones, “ Sometimes people fail, if you're pushed in something and not ablt to find something right for you, you might not succeed”

What's Next

- Kimberly Campbell - from Camden and Erick the photographer come from Camden , Sharon Barber Lee -based in Atlanta and Camden, knew there was a minimal scene, didn't know how deep history of art was in community. Had no resource or place or ability to access that community.
- Exploring and experiminte more of mural painting, soething she was introduced to because of the apprenticeship program or pushing boundaries of mural painting, working in collaboration with other communities, students and other muralists

- Building a sense of community through photography club, studying photography and continuing to stay engaged in the arts in Camden esp putting photos in schools to show others there are other career paths, creative ones

Conclusions

Resources

The current landscape of Camden's art scene includes the Virgillo House, Fire House and Creative Studios, Creative Arts High School Morgan Villag, Hope works and to name a few creative outlets where youth can explore and are encouraged to engage with the arts, IDEA Center, Rutgers.

Quotes

- I'm learning obviously with these different artists that aren't from Camden, but I'm still like integrating those core values that I have which, you know, I have no problem with that.
- It affects the watershed because you know, all those, all those different chemicals and everything just like, and materials, they just are floating into our water. And the Delaware river is where we got our water, like, like from New York all the way down to Delaware like that, that bay, that all those people involved in this area, they get our water from the same source.
- it's so awesome is the Meccan 11, because it's like, you know, you see this robot and he's actually picking up trash and he's like physically doing the action and showing people like this, this is like a collection of what we do as people.

Experiential

Many cited their favorite installations with touching the arth, "you're playing with like this mud and the strawand hands on experience, creating the structure. you

were really like integrated, like it was you and, and the object itself, which I loved the most., It also brought the community together with events that used the pizza oven and the love for nature.

Art Community

history of being way more industrious, way more industrial. Um, you know, like we have Philadelphia right next to us and they're known for being like obviously more artsy and everything like that, because they've already been developed to the point where they can now integrate the arts and that community so deeply.

- Camden is getting there, community is coming together slowly but surely
- get funding for it.

Collaboration

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Other Thoughts

- So then that might also become a conversation in a future where now that, you know, we're, we want these, these good things, and we are creating the, like the community to be, um, you know, a little more beautiful or beautified, like, is this going to scare people to thinking that, you know, they're going to have to eventually move out because property values going to go up and.

Intentions

- my main goal for me view was to network, was to meet people, to meet like-minded people who, who had a drive, who had some motive to do great work within an artistic area or in the community. I, I met people from Jersey, from Pennsylvania and the people from New York who were willing to come to the community and give out a helping hand. And that to me was honest. Beautiful. And. The whole purpose, really wanting to be in the view was already fulfilled.“ Set a goal, pursue it and accomplish it. Nobody like nobody gave me the impression that they didn't want to be there.”people who were enjoying the work that you were. They all wanted to get their hands dirty and be creative, you know, and interact. And because of that, it made me comfortable to be a part of that.
- The apprenticeship program was so supportive, because of who it was comprised of, that it helped Brein overcome fear of putting himself out there

and being social. It pushed him to started interacting and putting ideas out there. I wasn't afraid. put myself out there and that led to plenty of other conversations that led to opportunity.

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Making change in camden &Representation of camden artists

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- Brein became interested in the issues because he wanted to be represneted among the camden artists involved in the project, and about how illegal trash dumping impacted what he cared about - wild life. It's only sad when we don't do something about it. Brein wanted to pursue a change within the community he had been living in, to at least make an affort for change and it was a n eye opening experience for him, to see what he was capable of and what the city was capable of

Benefits

- Um, I felt in a sense rejuvenating to kind of work with natural resources and to work with the community who were, who was also enjoying the same activity.
- Always wanted to connect with the community, and see a city is as a good as its community, and want to be part of a community and inspired greaterd
- “Camden has been needing something like this for quite some time, and it's been needing some type of awareness, something to help people open up their eyes to their environment and, and what's, what's really gone. To communicated with the community

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