

Art in Plain Sight: “The Peaceful Warriors” and “No Future – No Past – No You – No Me”

Written by Bruce Walters

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The Peaceful Warriors by Skip Willits and *No Future – No Past – No You – No Me* by Terry Rathje are located in an alley, not displayed prominently at a building’s entrance or in an open location as one might expect for such thoughtful and professionally produced artworks. Both artists, however, created their pieces knowing that they would be displayed alongside graffiti, dumpsters, and loading docks.



Entering the alley between Second and Third avenues from 17th Street in the Rock Island District – near Theo’s Java Club – one is initially met by Willits’ three metal sculptures mounted high on a brick wall. The welded masks, made from hot rolled-metal sheets, are approximately five feet in height. In the daytime, they feel benign; their gaze is diffident. At night, they feel like

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armored sentries posted at an entry into darkness.

This difference in mood reflects an interest that Willits has explored for years. As he told me: “I’m always interested in opposites and how they strangely seem to fit together for me. These words (‘Peaceful Warriors’) juxtaposed have opposite meaning to most. But this was my train of thought – warriors for peace. Or warriors struggling for peace.”

In addition to working with contradictions of appearance and intent, Willits’ artwork references ritual African masks and other non-Western cultural styles. Seen in the context of an urban environment, the piece is a confluence of allusions and ideas. The artist didn’t realize that dumpsters would be parked directly beneath his work, but that’s fine with him. He said he’s surprised – and, I sense, a bit disappointed – that his work hasn’t been graffitied.



About 50 yards farther into the alley is a series of four painted panels, *No Future – No Past – No You – No Me*. Rathje painted one of those phrases beneath a related image on each panel: “No Future” is symbolized by the wheel of fortune; “No Past” by a baby (a newborn has no past); “No You” by a portrait of someone other than the artist; and “No Me” by a painting of an x-ray. The images also have a personal meaning to the artist. For example, the newborn is Rathje’s grandson, and the x-ray is of the artist’s hand – an image of himself, but not his outer appearance.

Inspired by Buddhist teachings, the series was meant as “a reminder to all of us that we should be conscious of the whole human race and not to think only about ourselves,” Rathje said. “Simultaneously we should not be too worried about the past or overly concerned about the future, because the past is already vanishing into the distance and the future is uncertain.”

The intended message of Rathje’s work, like Willits’, is about inner peace. However, that meaning is somewhat undermined by beginning each phrase with “no”; painted in white on red, the words are like four consecutive stop signs.

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Perhaps this was his intent, as Rathje said he hoped his artwork would stop people in their tracks – compelling them to think about what the words and images meant. Instead, he said, the piece has been misinterpreted as nihilistic; the artist once received a letter from a woman offering to help paint over it.

These and other artworks were created for an “alley gallery” as part of MidCoast Fine Arts’ partnering with the City of Rock Island in 2000. It was an innovative idea – breathing life into our relationship with art by putting it, provocatively, in an atypical urban setting. However, in a more conventional gallery context – where each artwork is seen in its own space and is often accompanied by an artist statement – the subtleties and purposeful contradictions of these works would be better understood.

Bruce Walters is a professor of art at Western Illinois University.

This is part of an occasional series on the history of public art in the Quad Cities. If there’s a piece of public art that you’d like to learn more about, e-mail the location and a brief description to BD-Walters@wiu.edu .