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FEMALE DOMINANCE IN PUBLIC ART:

**SO THERE ARE A LOT
OF FEMALE PUBLIC
ARTISTS. SO WHAT?**



Art and science were my loves from an early age. After a very circuitous route through biology and art, I arrived in Seattle to get an M.F.A. at UW in printmaking and drawing. In 1972, I met a teacher who was opening the doors to interdisciplinary and collaborative activity—pushing printmaking out into a much larger arena of thinking and opportunity. The whole venture struck a deep chord.

When the first public art project was announced in Seattle, I was immediately drawn to it. Here was an art activity that was collaborative and interdisciplinary, involving a challenging thinking process and learning about new issues and places. Best of all, it wasn't in the academic realm, it was in the real world. This new kind of work allowed me to step outside of the limited range of the art world.

At first I thought public art was inextricably linked to design; but now I realize design is only one aspect of it.

I am more interested in a collaborative process that supports an unfettered, creative perspective in the mix, and through engaging in public art, I always feel that I am incredibly lucky to be the person bringing in that perspective. I love my role as an instigator of the opening up or shifts in thinking that support new possibilities. Ultimately, this process allows the projects to be more considered. The facilities or places that get built have more heart and perhaps more soul. Sometimes it's subtle, but always it is different than what would have been.

Is what I contribute different because I'm female? That's a question I'm thinking about, but my gut reaction is, yes.

Carolyn Law has been working in the field of public art for the past sixteen years, beginning with the Broad Street Substation in 1983. In addition to the featured projects, she has participated on design teams for the Factoria Transfer Station and the Novelty Hill Bridge. Law has also administered projects for the Washington State Arts Commission and the King County Public Art Program. She has served on several professional boards and commissions including the Citizen's Advisory Committee for Safeco Field and the Seattle Design Commission.

Bainbridge Island Local Improvement District
East and west of Route 305 on High School Road,
Bainbridge Island, WA
© Carolyn Law 1992

Originally developed as part of a larger design-team scope, this separate art project was created consisting of five special 5' x 5' sections of sidewalk, each with a different image and text made of cast concrete parts that fit together like a puzzle. They were situated at hub spots along the street, seen individually, as well as collectively, by those walking the entire length. Each section has an image associated with a quality of the community and phrases from poems of two island poets related to the image.

CAROLYN LAW

photos: Carolyn Law

Ephrata, Washington Entry Project
Southeast of Ephrata, WA on Route 17
going towards Moses Lake
© Carolyn Law 1994

This multi-faceted community art project marks three entrances/exits to the town sited within the spectacular landscape of the semi-arid desert at the southern end of the Grand Coulee. The project utilizes earthwork, local basalt rock in all its variations from columns to talus shards, and landscape of indigenous plants. The powerful basalt columns can be seen from miles away and are lit at night with solar-powered lighting. The Soap Lake entrance plate steel band was fabricated completely by city crews.



SO THERE ARE A LOT
OF FEMALE PUBLIC
ARTISTS. SO WHAT?

by Carolyn Law

A common experience—arriving at a meeting for a non-project-related issue concerning public art and you, the artist, will likely find the table filled with a majority of women—most public art administrators and project managers are females.

A common experience—arriving at a team meeting for a public art project and you, the artist, are likely to be the only woman at the table. With rare exception, will the architect, engineer or contractor be female? Perhaps if there is a landscape architect involved, there might be another female. If it is a project that requires interface with a public agency, the agency project manager just might be a female.

Given the skew towards males still existing in the daily practice of design, engineering and building professions, and in the “other” art world of galleries and museums, it might be considered unusual that approximately half (give or take) the artists working in the public realm are female. A cursory explanation might be that most public art projects fall within the public sector, guided by governmental agencies, which, we know, are much more diverse than the private sector both ethnically and by gender. Consequently female artists, when working in this field, are given a welcoming entrance and feel at home. But these same artists must pass on through that initial zone into the private world of the project which is still dominated by males. The public art field is also relatively new, just 25-some years, and not subject to the same exclusionary thinking or prejudice as the other, age-old art world. We could stop here in explaining why women are succeeding in such large numbers. But are there other reasons? Is this the whole story?

When talking recently to a number of women artists and one lone man, assembled for a round table, all of whom have been in the public art world for a good number of years and collectively have made huge contributions to the public environment, there was a lot of talk of strategies learned. There is no question that these folks can all sit at the table as artists and art administrators (identified by their expertise, not gender), have ready a bag of tricks which allows them to set forth new ideas effectively, defend their creative thinking, influence the conceptual

premise of the project, spur on the collaborative design team process and/or tackle the site-specific art issues. Generally, the women talk of carrying forth the creative torch to an end that they can be proud of, able to cause the fur to fly as need be.

When probing beyond this dry truth, the idea that women’s approach towards public art projects—the way they think about the context and environment of the project, site or building, how they interact with their collaborative partners, their aesthetics and priorities—might be distinctive in notable ways by virtue of their gender is more or less brushed aside. We do lightly touch on women’s domestic sense of space and place, the impacts of the women’s movement, and social conditioning resulting in an ability and willingness to be flexible. The discussion circles around individual temperament, be it male or female, as the prime success factor. So, surprisingly, attempts to broaden the discussion beyond the inherent diversity of the public sector and individual ability hit a dead-end in this round table discussion. Is the only question then, whether you’re better suited for this type of work if you have a hybrid—or as one person put it, an androgynous—viewpoint and working method?

Yet the conversation about how women contribute specifically due to their gender is well worth having. Most importantly, it is necessary to be conscious of how and why. I think gender-related consciousness figures into the public art process because women are contributing creative thinking to the collaboration that springs from a different orientation. This is having a beneficial effect and impact on the built environment via public art. The opportunity is now here to see a broad, acknowledged influence, unlike the more localized, unacknowledged influence that has been going on in one way or another for generations.

I remember many conversations essentially saying, “Wait until there’s a woman in that position,” or “Imagine what would have happened if there were more women involved in this process discussion.” Why is that? Do we really want to see a female president only because there has never been one in this country or because it would be a curiosity? After almost a half-century of

being surrounded by male siblings and family members and raising two sons, I have gradually come to see clear and poignant differences between myself and them. I didn’t really have to reread *In a Different Voice* by Carol Gilligan to think so. This enlightening book illuminates how the female perspective, as different from males, might impact the human experience if women participate in shaping our environments.

Gilligan’s book points out that women tend to define the world through an ethic of caring, take into account circumstances and relationships in our consideration of issues and events, and think of responsibility as a response to diverse considerations rather than a limiting action defined by rules and beliefs. These, among other differences, distinguish us. As we work in the larger community of neighborhoods, towns and cities, the potential exists for advancing a sense of meaning and living that is grounded in a complex sense of relationships, a recognition of the need for a flowing connection, less bounded by a hierarchy of rules and beliefs. I think that this perspective can lead us to a more creative, cooperative mode of life.

The collaborative public art process is a cooperative social process. To this, women bring a vitally different awareness and understanding of the web of issues—context, use of place, empathy and passionate concern for people, relationships and the urban and natural environment, rereading the past, evoking a sense of the future—that is of profound importance to our world. Having women actively engaged as conscious participants in this process, able to step out of the domestic scale into our community and urban scale environments, is flat-out important and it is the public art programs that are providing a significant increase in the numbers of women being able to do this.

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