

Finders keepers

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Abstract: Find a painting, pick it up A group of children and adults met Friday with intentions of peppering the city with artwork. [...]two women stopped.

Full text: A glass painting is hanging in a tree at a public park; catching the sunlight, catching your eye, catching your interest.

The design is a bouquet of lavender daffodils set against a lemon-yellow background, and it shimmers among the leafless branches.

You look over your shoulders; no one is watching. It would be perfect above your kitchen table. It would be perfect for your wife, your mother, your sister.

You see a tag attached. It says: "Help yourself, finders keepers."

Do you take it?

Free Art Friday

Free Art Friday is one part global art movement, one part social experiment.

Each Friday, artists across the world leave their works on the street or in public places -- propped on a bench, dangling from a doorknob -- for people to enjoy. There are no rules. There is no commitment. It's free for anyone to take home and enjoy.

The creative effort is gaining traction in Salem, thanks to a local nonprofit creative reuse organization called DIY Studio that two Salem friends formed.

Co-founder Jessica Ramey said she watched a video about Free Art Friday and suggested it as a project DIY Studio should sponsor.

"It was just something I felt needed to happen," Ramey said.

The two began leaving art on the streets in early January, some of it their own, some of it donated by friends. They launched a "Free Art Friday Salem" Facebook page and encouraged artists and art seekers to engage with each other. Free Art Friday is somewhat a scavenger hunt; artists post clues by taking photos of their art in a well-known spot in town and those who follow the Facebook page head out to find it.

Ramey said the weekly event promotes local artists, attracts people to downtown Salem and provides residents with the opportunity to own original artwork at no cost.

Perhaps the most interesting element of the project, however, is the public's reaction to the free, found art.

Find a painting, pick it up

A group of children and adults met Friday with intentions of peppering the city with artwork.

Each person came bearing pieces they had created themselves or had collected from friends or coworkers for the weekly event. Deanne Beausoleil, instructor of art history at Chemeketa Community College, had two pieces with her.

"I started to teach art because I think art should be available to everybody," she said.

Wendy Derting and her 9-year-old son, Travis Derting, showed up with a bag full of hand-painted wooden eggs. Ramey was there with her two children and an assortment of items.

And Cindy Lacey showed up with several pieces, including the framed glass painting of the daffodil bouquet.

The group set off, leaving a print of a pumpkin field in a divot outside the YMCA. They placed a handmade turquoise bracelet gingerly on a utility pipe. They left a glass ornament on a fence in Willson Park.

They hid the wooden eggs throughout the Capitol Mall, as though Easter had come early. And at a fork in the sidewalk, where it most certainly wouldn't be missed, they hung Lacey's glass painting in a leafless tree.

"It's going to end up where it belongs," Lacey said. "Hopefully with someone who needs their day brightened up."

The point of Free Art Friday is not to hide in the bushes and surprise the person who collects the art. But just for fun, this one time, the group decided to stick around to see who would claim the glass daffodil painting.

The courage to take

It hung there for an hour or longer as dozens of people passed it by. People on cellphones, people on bikes, people alone or with friends. No one stopped to pluck the painting from the tree.

Could it be that passersby simply weren't connecting with the painting?

"It might be that people have a hard time imagining there can really be no strings attached," Ramey suggested.

The group decided to experiment and placed a painted wooden egg in the middle of the sidewalk. Several people stepped around it or over it. Finally, two women stopped. One of them nudged it with the toe of her shoe before hesitantly picking it up.

"One wonders if Salem is actually ready for this," Wendy said.

Eventually, the group decided to move on, leaving Lacey's painting in the park.

The connection

Midday Friday, Gabrielle James was walking through the Capitol Mall on her way to lunch when a shimmer caught her eye.

James, who works at Willamette University, had heard about Free Art Friday, but it wasn't on her mind when she saw a glass painting hanging in a tree at a fork in the sidewalk.

"I was so excited. It's lovely," she said. "It's a gorgeous little piece; really sweet and really well-made. And on such a beautiful day, it just seemed fitting."

For now, the painting is in her office with the tag still on it because it reminds her it was handmade and is a part of Salem. She has future plans to move it into a window so it can catch the sunlight.

Later that day, James logged onto Facebook and found the "Free Art Friday Salem" page. She found the photo Lacey had posted earlier after hanging the painting in the tree.

"I got it! And I LOVEEEEE it!" James wrote. "You do gorgeous work and utterly made my day!"

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How to participate

Artists: Artists of every level and ability can participate in Free Art Friday. Free, printable tags that say "Free Art Friday" are available online at www.diystudio.net. Take a picture of your artwork in the place you leave it and upload the image to the "Free Art Friday Salem" Facebook page at www.facebook.com/freetartfridaysalem to offer art hunters a clue.

Hunters: Clues about where the art has been left can be found on the "Free Art Friday Salem" Facebook page each week.

Online

See my Inside Stories blog at StatesmanJournal.com/insidestories for a behind-the-scenes glimpse of reporting this story.

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