

THE MALDEN MUSE VISITS THE ART CONNECTION

By Justin Wollenhaupt, the Malden Muse



The Brush Mobile was unveiled at the 2006 Artist's Ball at the Boston Center for the Arts on April 1st. Ultimately, The Art Connection received over 800 brushes from about 60 artists in the Greater Boston area for the huge Brush Mobile installation. The Brush Mobile was so well received that the Boston Center for the Arts decided to officially apply for permanent installation of the work

The idea is so simple, I can't believe no one had thought of it before. But then, that's usually the hallmark of great idea - it's obvious in retrospect, like the concept of gravity. But someone had to have the idea first, and in this case, her name was Fay Chandler. The idea, simply enough, was this: I make art, and have extra art lying around. You deserve art, but can't afford it. What if I gave my surplus art to you?

Of course, it's a little more complicated than that, but that's it in a nutshell. It's been eleven years since Fay had that revelation, and in that time, thousands of pieces of art have changed hands. You may have seen some of them in the waiting room of your local clinic, or at your local daycare center. In Malden, you may have seen them at Triangle Inc., an employment, health, and social service center for young people with disabilities, or at the headquarters of the Tri-City Housing Task Force for Homeless Families. The art is varied, but the recipient agencies share a few common traits - if you're a public or non-profit institution and you can't afford to purchase art with your limited funds, you probably qualify.

And if you contact The Art Connection, chances are you'll end up speaking with Tova Speter. One member of the three-person Art Connection team, Speter is the Program Manager, a painter, and a donor to the program as well. A licensed mental health counselor and former therapist in the Malden Public Schools doing art-based therapy, Speter has broadened her scope, connecting with thousands of individuals who have otherwise poor access to the inspiration and human empathy that high art provides. I spoke with Tova about the Art Connection program, its past and future, and their most recent endeavor, the "Call to Brushes" project. So spoke eloquently, so here she is in her own words.

On the history of the program:

"It was basically the idea of a single person that then grew into a bigger enterprise. Her name is Fay Chandler. She had had a big exhibit of her work and at the end, whatever didn't sell, she thought it such a shame to bring it back to her studio to sit there. She thought, 'I don't want to take it back, I have too much stuff, so I want to try to give it away.' She got some of her artist friends together and they started thinking of this idea and it's sort of taken off ever since. This is our eleventh year and we've placed over 2500 works of art with over 200 agencies from over 150 art donors. And The Art Connection is growing in popularity.

We have expansion sites now in Washington, D.C. and New York City. It's growing every year and it's exciting to think about an Art Connection, D.C. and one in New York, and in other cities that are sort of in the works."

On the spread of the Art Connection business model:

"If someone approaches us from anywhere and says they're interested in starting something, we'll make every possible effort to help them out and give them information. Because it is a non-profit, we're very mission-driven. [Fay's] whole vision was to have this idea spread and to have people benefit. The whole thing is so mutually beneficial to both the agencies and the artists. The artists get their work seen and enjoyed, and it has a daily impact on people's lives. They make connections with people who might not otherwise have access to art, who don't go to museums regularly or have much art in their lives. The agencies then get to extend that welcoming, comforting, homey feeling that art can bring to a space. It's so beneficial that [Fay] wants it to spread everywhere, maybe internationally. I keep telling them all, if they want to open an international branch, I'll go. I like to travel. *[laughs]*"

On receiving art:

"Most of our referrals are word-of-mouth. So someone who works for one agency happens to be at another agency and sees a piece of art with a plaque that has the title of the piece and the artist's name and 'Donated by The Art Connection.' So when people see that, that's usually when they think to call us."

On the benefits to the donating artists:

"Well, there are the little things, like when I go to do an art selection meeting and some of the participants see a piece they like, they'll ask for the contact information for that artist. It's hard to tell really, when there's just a piece of art up with the name of the artist, who is going to Google them and search for them that way, but we do offer some art donor services. There's the publicity through the plaque, and anyone who donates through us, there's a list of different 'calls to artists,' exhibitions, opportunities... we get them from all different places. We forward our list of opportunities to all of our artists so that they hear first. So we try to do things that promote our artists. There's a program we had where we worked to get different artists' work on book covers, and one of our artists was successful with that. But across the board, it's really about them wanting to have an impact. They're motivated more by connecting with people as opposed to sales."

On the types of work donated:

"Some people offer works that are much older that don't really fit in with their current exhibits. Some are experimenting with different styles. There are many reasons. I'm an artist and I'm an art donor, and one of the ones I've donated is this huge, special piece that I have that I just don't have room for and I'd love it to be somewhere where it can impact people."

On the art selection process:

"There's this interesting group dynamic in the process that I facilitate because everyone has opinions, so depending on who's in the room picking the art, meetings can go two hours to, well, I had one that was four hours of this interesting group dynamic coming out between the executive director and the staff. My background is in art therapy so I have experience in group participation and interaction around art."

On placing art:

"It's amazing how hard it is to give art away. People who work in non-profits are really busy. They're so mission-driven that all of their time is spent with clients, so it's hard to engage them in another process. The biggest factor in having a successful placement is if there's a person at that agency who is so excited about it and so invested that they'll make it happen and push for it to follow through.. In my experience, all of the agencies are so excited to have a break from whatever work they're doing - for me to come in and do

this whole slideshow and help them pick out art. It's a really fun process, but it can be hard sometimes [for recipient agencies] to set the meetings up, but once it's done they have a blast."

On funding:

"95% of funding is through individual donations. We have a really large, active, and generous donor base, so a lot of the funding comes through there and then some funds come through the Mass Cultural Council. The New England Foundation for the Arts gave us a grant for this mural project that I just started so we're getting some funding through there. So sometimes we get grants and those types of things, but most of our funding comes from individuals."

On the "Call to Brushes":

"The brush project is really exciting. There's the artist's ball at the Boston Center For The Arts and we were trying to come up with an idea for an installation that wasn't just a personal piece. We really wanted to incorporate the idea behind The Art Connection which is that there are so many artists who connect with people in so many ways, so we decided to just solicit artists [to donate used brushes]. Some are from artists that I've never heard of personally, there's a bunch from our donor base of artists, and some of them are from very reputable, well-known artists. There's one artist who submitted brushes and put some of them in a small piece of sculpture and painted them. It would probably be worth a lot of money because he's a very prominent Boston artist. It might be worth thousands of dollars, but it's going to be part of this sculptural installation. It will be a hanging, mobile-type piece, and the idea is it will be up during the ball, and afterwards, since we are The Art Connection, we will place it with an agency."

On the Greater Malden area:

"I was very surprised that we didn't have more artists or recipient agencies from [the greater Malden area], and they're all places that are eligible for placement through us, so if more people there know about us, then maybe we can go and do more placements in the area and get more artists from there too."

To donate art or receive art, contact The Art Connection at (617) 338-7668 or info@theartconnection.org. For more information on the program, visit www.theartconnection.org.