

CURB

HOME BACKROADS INTERSECTIONS BOULEVARDS STORM'S-A-BREWIN' ABOUT

BEYOND MUSEUM WALLS

 JOSIE HOPKINS BACKROADS



Photo by Thomas Ferrella

Silos don't normally have eyes. They especially don't have human eyes, big, grayish blue ones with a broken ring of gold encircling the pupil.

Yet sitting off of a winding, country back road, an installation piece stares back dauntingly at curious visitors. It plays with the idea of physiognomy, or the theory that someone's personality can be interpreted through their outward appearance. The artist, **Thomas Ferrella** from Madison, says he wanted to inform visitors that although they came to view the art, the members of the community were also there evaluating them. He calls his project, "**A Mutual Curiosity.**"

This piece is part of a large public art project, the Farm Art DTour,



All of the subjects of Ferrella's installation pieces were Sauk County



which places 10 artists and creative teams' artworks along a 50-mile route in the rolling Wisconsin countryside. Visitors are encouraged to either drive or bike the path that circles through the towns of Reedsburg, Loganville, Hill Point, Loreto, La Rue, North Freedom and Rock Springs, all located in south central Wisconsin. The program intends to spotlight Wisconsin's agricultural activities, which have historically played an important role in the development of the state. Ferrella incorporates this theme into his artwork by integrating silos, farm gates and barbed-wire fences into his pieces.

residents, including this dog named Lucy. This is the only piece the artist let the land owner keep. Photo by Thomas Ferrella.

With exhibitions like the Farm Art DTour, public art becomes more than mere art standing along a pathway — it instead launches conversations and creates bonds among communities. Whether the art be among farm machinery, outside a suburban elementary school or at the base of State Street in Madison, these projects abound across the state.

Broadly, public art has recorded society's history.

"Artists are the recorders of time and history," says Don Berg, an artist who created the [National Ice Sculpting competition](#), a large public art event in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. "We are the messengers. We are the recorders of life."

Towering stone sculptures of valiant leaders, European-like representations of famous allegories and murals depicting social matters have long decorated our cities' landscapes. The artwork is usually featured in prominent public locations and often stands before us as a reflection of society's values, worries and emotions.

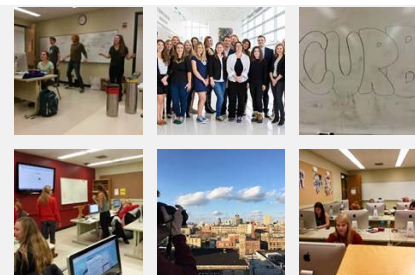
These classic types of public art take on many forms across Wisconsin. From early times, Indian Effigy Mounds were left behind to represent things like the sky, the earth, animals and spirits. Waupun, in central Wisconsin, is home to a park that contains one of the most famous statues in the world, the "[End of the Trail](#)," which depicts a Native American slumped over on a horse, reminding us of the fight of the uprooted native people. In present-day Milwaukee, the so-called "[Bronze Fonz](#)," a statue representing an iconic character from the Milwaukee-based sitcom Happy Days, cheerfully gives the world a thumbs-up on the downtown RiverWalk.

These works are now giving way to more accessible forms of public art, where viewing artwork means interacting with the pieces, the artists and the audience. Art now provides an opportunity for artists to give back to communities as well as invigorate discussions about important issues that we face as a society.

Waukesha's feature event

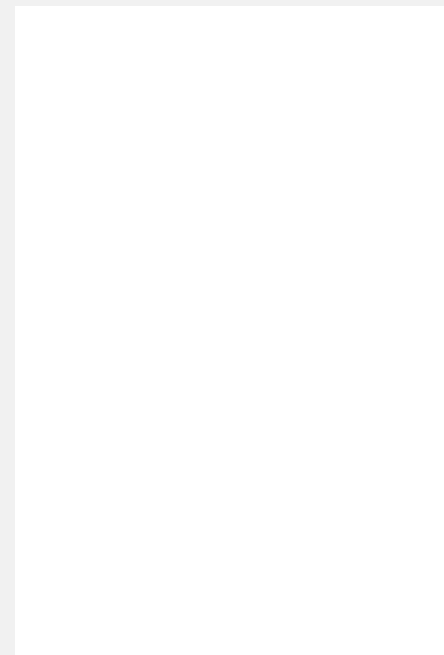
In 2013, Gibson Guitar selected Waukesha, located in suburban Milwaukee, to be one of eight [GuitarTowns](#) in the world. Waukesha gained publicity after its own iconic musician, Lester William Polsfuss, otherwise known as Les Paul, referred to himself as the "Wizard of Waukesha" in the early days of his career. Paul is also acclaimed for inventing the first solid-body electric guitar, the Gibson Les Paul.

GuitarTowns are part of a larger public art project that raises money for the musical education of younger musicians. Seventeen 10-foot tall fiberglass Gibson Les Paul guitars, as well as 28 regular-sized Gibson Les Paul guitars, were



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donated to the city for locally renowned and student artists to decorate. Gibson Guitar required artists to present their ideas before a board before receiving the honor of transforming the guitars into works of art.

One local artist, [Andy Haas Schneider](#) of nearby Waterford, was selected to embellish one of these guitars. Schneider dedicates much of her free time to several types of public art projects.

"You don't do it to make money ... I do it because I like leaving something beautiful in the world," Schneider says.

One of her favorite materials to work with is stained glass, which she uses to devise pieces of artwork, like glass windows, to be auctioned off at nonprofit events. An artist requested that she construct a regular-size guitar design out of stained glass for the Guitartown event, and she excitedly agreed.

After some 40 hours of brainstorming, patterning, cutting, grinding, gluing and grouting, Andy's design came to reflect Les Paul and Mary Ford's song, "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles," in addition to the organic architecture of the Wisconsin native Frank Lloyd Wright. Vibrant maroon, burnt orange, deep blue and forest green bubbles float on a sunny background with colored glass marbles lining the sides. She aptly named it after the song that inspired its creation:

["Forever Blowing Bubbles."](#)

One challenge artists battled on this project was maintaining the guitars' playability, ensuring that this project would remain interactive for community members.

"When I was doing the glass design and placement and grouting, I had to take into account that the knobs and bridge and strings would be added when I was done and it would have to actually be a usable, playable guitar," Schneider says.

Rather than a daylong event, GuitarTown became something that continually gathered steam. "Forever Blowing Bubbles," as well as the other guitars, were on display all summer in places like the Waukesha State Bank and the local Ace Hardware. Later, the artists and sponsors attended a gala, and its fundraiser ultimately drew in \$12,000 for the Food Pantry of Waukesha County, Habitat for Humanity of Waukesha County and the Waukesha School District. Local artists, as well as the Walldogs, a nationally acclaimed group of sign and mural artists, also painted 15 GuitarTown murals that relate to Les Paul and Waukesha's history on the sides of buildings.

Uniting communities

One thing Schneider likes to point out is that public art within her community is collaborative, which is something she finds rare in other parts of the art industry.

"Whereas in business, I see this among photographers or other designers, people play their cards very close to their vest because they don't want somebody to be better than them or get something that they don't have," Schneider says.

"That's not like that in these communities. When I find out about a public art thing, I go to my artist friends and I say, 'Your contribution will make this show even better. Come along. Join me.'"

Other forms of public art inspire more interaction within the community. This is what Don Berg was looking for when he first got the idea to host an ice-carving competition in Milwaukee after a local ad in the newspaper invited people to try ice carving along Milwaukee's Lakefront. He immediately went down and participated.

"There were some complaints to the police department because of the traffic jam we had created of spectators," Berg

says. "I recognized that as a signal to keep it going."

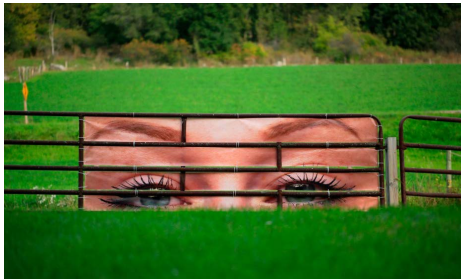
Soon after this event, in 1984, Berg started the nonprofit organization WinterFun Inc. The nonprofit has been hosting the U.S. National Snow Sculpting Competition since 1994, in Lake Geneva, located in south central Wisconsin. The state was the first to host a snow-sculpting competition; now, 13 states participate at the national competition. National winners are selected to compete in international events like the Olympic Games. This helps foster an even greater international public art community that extends beyond Wisconsin.

There are smaller ice-sculpting competitions in the surrounding areas of Milwaukee as well, which Schneider says prompted her to begin working with public art about 10 years ago. She says what makes ice carving unique, as with many other forms of public art, is that it's engaging within the community.

"It's a double-edged sword, because when I was growing up, I learned that you don't touch art," Schneider says. "You go to the art museum, and you don't touch it. This stuff is exactly the opposite. I want them to touch it, I want them to feel it. I've had blind people come by when I'm ice carving and ask if they can touch the ice, and I'm so excited. I'm like, 'Absolutely. Come and feel it. It's cold — see if you can tell me what it is.'"

Enhancing public health

Public art supports public health and economic development in Wisconsin as well. In Madison, Karin Wolf, the arts program administrator for the City of Madison, says public art is often used as a "symbolic language" that inspires conversation about important issues. Wolf works with Madison Arts Commission's BLINK, a temporary public art program funded by taxpayers that gives grants to artists wishing to create public art pieces. She says they have funded projects that address issues such as racism, sexual assault and social justice.



Ferrella's Art DTour project was funded by BLINK. Photo by Thomas Ferrella.

"There's a lot of reports in the past year about our inequalities in Madison," Wolf says. "A lot of people will text those issues to the artists and use the art as a conversation starter to break open and dig deeper into what is troubling Madison."

BLINK then encourages artists to work with local organizations that pertain to that issue, further opening up community dialogue.

Community fundraisers also take advantage of these projects.

Schneider recently designed a rain barrel for a community event in Brown Deer, a suburb of Milwaukee, which was purchased afterward by a local school's principal. Schneider converted a

large canister into a yellow Minion, a popular character from the well-known children's movie "Despicable Me."

"It had function," Schneider says. "It wasn't just a piece of plastic sitting out in the world, it had use ... It taught [people] how to be respectful of our resources and use a rain barrel."

Tomorrow's public art

Although the public art scene in Wisconsin is robust, there are questions about its future. The Wisconsin Arts Board, a state agency that promotes many public art initiatives in Wisconsin, has seen reduced funding. The Percent for Art

Program, which called for two-tenths of one percent of a budget for any new government building or renovation to be allocated to acquiring or creating a form of public art, was suspended in 2011.

However, there is a larger, nationwide movement gaining traction toward building a broader public art tradition. In Madison, it's Free Art Friday. On the UW-Madison campus, students can participate in this movement on the first Friday of each month through Wheelhouse Studios at the Wisconsin Union. Wheelhouse Studios provides art supplies for students to create projects such as sea-glass candle holders and upcycled T-shirt bracelets.

With the temporary art program BLINK, projects in Madison are chosen on the basis of how conspicuous they are, as well as how they relate to the surrounding area.

“Our commissioners are often quoted as saying: ‘It’s just not blinky enough,’” Wolf says, describing the process of selecting artwork. “And by that they mean it’s just not spontaneous enough; it’s not surprising enough. It seems like it would be a project grant, not something that just interrupts your day with a big surprise.”

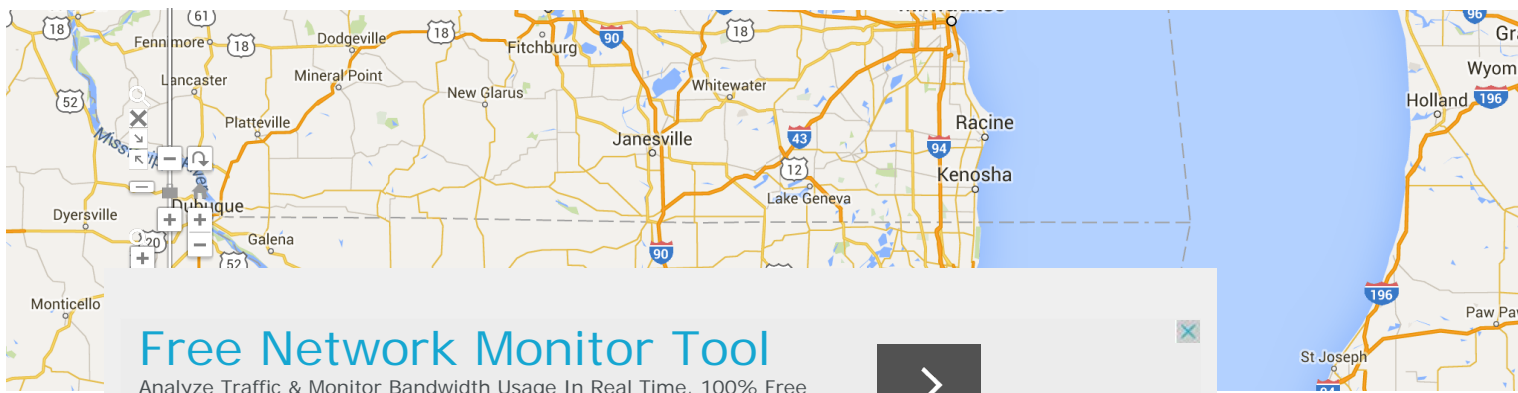
Public art brings together communities of people and makes an impression on their daily lives. It wants to inspire us to be as jolly as the “Bronze Fonz,” to remember fallen American Indian heroes, to be curious about one another.

Next time you leave your house, pay more attention to what’s around you. Pause for a moment as you stroll past an ice-sculpting competition, a GuitarTown mural, those big blue eyes in the green countryside. Art is everywhere across Wisconsin — you just have to open your eyes to see it.

Photos submitted by Thomas Ferrella. To see more of his work, please visit his [website](#).

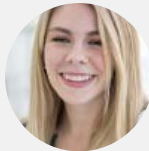
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JOSIE HOPKINS

PRODUCTION EDITOR

Josie first dove into the magazine world after she created her family's personal magazine, The Family Gazette, on a snowy Minnesota day in the fifth grade. Written, printed and distributed by herself, she believes this experience prepped her well for her position in Curb as well as her role as Editor-in-Chief of Souvenirs, a travel magazine at UW-Madison. Lately she has taken an interest in watching Spanish telenovelas, Googling places she wants to visit and experimenting with Adobe Illustrator. She is studying journalism, Spanish and digital studies. Future plans include graduating in May 2016 as well as finding one of those "job things."



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