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Unexpected art

Finding beauty in unlikely locales

by **CRAIG JOHNSON** AUGUST 12, 2015



CHRIS COLLINS

Artist David Gurkowski's work is still in progress at the Fordem Avenue Storage Facility.

No poet has ever said “As beautiful as a storage locker.” This makes the Fordem Avenue Storage Facility all the more exciting. Where once stood a drab gray wall, an expressionistic green landscape has bloomed. Owner Gary Poole says that artist David Gutkowski’s work is still in progress, but it is already a nice little surprise for commuters heading north from Johnson Street.

Compared to the major public art that decorates Madison — the mosaics of the Capitol or the Dr. Evermor “Dreamkeeper” birds on Paterson Street — the wall may seem insignificant. But like other bits of unexpected art around the city — some hidden and others in plain sight — it brings a thrill to the people who find it. Once discovered, this unexpected art does not easily blend back into the cityscape.



CHRIS COLLINS

The intricate painting of a naked, tattooed lady takes up one side of a building at the corner of First Street and East Washington Avenue.

The tattooed lady

The naked lady on the side of the building at the corner of First Street and East Washington Avenue takes up a whole wall, lying serenely on her belly, displaying a back full of tattoos. What makes this painting so unexpected is not the figure of the woman, but the intricate art she displays. A peacock twines into a skull, a dragon, an octopus and more. The lines stretch far beyond the bounds of where a back should end, swirling beyond the dimensions of the wall into an imagined infinity of ink.

The lady originated in 2007 when 1900 E. Washington Ave. housed Tranquil Tattoo. According to Matt Tucker, the city's zoning administrator, the mural was nearly nixed because of regulations banning murals from being "a graphic representation of what is going on at the property." That is to say, it couldn't advertise that tattoos were available inside.

Artists Seneca Marks, Zack Bartell and Joe Starkweather solved this problem by removing the needle working on the woman's back. By removing the depiction of tattooing and the company name or logo (it now sports the message "Support Your Local Artists") the painting fit within city regulations. SuperCharge, a juice bar/urban farm, now leases the space.



CHRIS COLLINS

In some places in the men's room at the Weary Traveler, the materials are six layers thick.

The Weary Traveler's men's room

Soon after Chris Berge opened the Weary Traveler in 2002, the walls of the men's room at the Willy Street gastro-pub suffered water damage. Rather than repaint the room, Berge grabbed maps and memorabilia from his travels and used them to cover the stain. Then he kept going until the walls, stalls and ceiling became the most entrancing piece of collage art in town. Over the years he and co-owner Bregan Fuller continued the process, using glossy magazines, Brazilian newspapers, charts, posters and old yearbook pages. Berge says that certain spots in the room have material "six layers thick."

The collage encourages creative forms of men's-room graffiti. As is to be expected, there are some snarky or lewd comments, but on occasional spots on the maps, patrons have drawn circles, pointing out their travels. At other restrooms, people scribble on the wall, "I was here." At the Weary, travelers say "I was there."

Due to the sheer quantity of ever-changing material, a man could get lost in there for hours. On a side note: The ladies' room, having suffered no damage, kept its original décor. It's nice enough, but not nearly as interesting as the men's room.





CHRIS COLLINS

With the building of Monona Terrace, only part of Richard Haas' 3-D mural is still visible.

The Olin Terrace Mural

In 1985, the city of Madison decided to finally grace the Monona lakeshore with the work of a world-famous artist from Spring Green. Not Frank Lloyd Wright, who 40 years prior had conceived of a massive structure on the same spot, but rather the muralist Richard Haas. Haas took a towering slab of a wall and created a 3-D grotto flanked by two false windows looking “out” to a view of the rooftop of Wright’s never-built pipe dream. The painting mocked Madison’s lack of guts for refusing an ambitious work by Wisconsin’s own genius architect. If Madison wouldn’t build the Monona Terrace, then Haas would create it with paint.

A little over a decade later, Madison built Monona Terrace, and in doing so hid Haas’ work from the world. The mural could not be moved, because it is attached to a retaining wall, so there it remains, stuck in a thin shaft — a sad piece of greatness deposited by progress and irony. Only part of it is still visible, either from the parking lot above or by commuters stuck in traffic on John Nolen Drive.



CHRIS COLLINS

The origin of the Hoyt Park Pyramid remains a mystery.

The Hoyt Park Pyramid

What ancient people carved out the Hoyt Park Pyramid? It lurks off a trail, 5½ feet tall, 6 feet wide at the base, with strange codes, patterns and small faces pressing out of the stone on one side.

The official story — what little there is of it — is that it was built by staff and children from the Preschool of the Arts, with the assistance of a UW grad student, sometime in the 1980s. The faces emerging from the pyramid are masks created by some of the young artists. When the preschool moved from its location adjacent to the park, the concrete sculpture was too heavy to move to its new home on Science Drive. So there it remains, obscured by bushes, waiting to confound those who happen upon it.

There is no plaque explaining its origin, which is for the best. Having no signage and being off the beaten path gives visitors the sensation that they are the first to see it in centuries. Karin Wolf, arts program administrator for the city of Madison, says she enjoys taking children to the park “to explore for the pyramid.” Explorers young and old can spend a few moments feeling like Indiana Jones. How many pieces of art do that? No instructions will here be given on how to find it, because that would take away the fun of finding it. The search is part of the magic.