

Around Town: Yahara River public art exhibit has passersby talking, reflecting



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Everyone has a reaction when they approach artist Chris Murphy's mummy-like figure looking over a bridge on the Yahara River, even when it's not lit up at night.

"It's terrifying, just terrifying," said Kirstin Cimo, 34, who had her husband, Justin, take a picture of her next to the art installation Sunday. "It looks so real and would be

absolutely terrifying to come up on it at night."

Murphy is one of five local artists who contributed to a month-long art exhibition on the Near East Side, "Reflections on the Banks of the Yahara River," organized by neighborhood residents Jessica Becker and Helen Sarakinos to celebrate the Yahara River.

In their own way, each of the artists — who also include Thomas Ferrella, Brenda Gratton, John Miller and Amy Wencel — attempted to pay tribute to the river along which their pieces are displayed. Red signs signify all the works, which are distributed along the Yahara between Lakes Mendota and Monona.

"We have gotten so much positive response about it," said Sarakinos, policy and advocacy director for the River Alliance of Wisconsin. "I've spoken to a lot of people who have said, 'I had no idea you could walk the parkway from lake to lake.' That was kind of an eye-opener for some people."

The project was awarded a \$1,500 BLINK grant, the maximum amount for the city-run public art program, said Karin Wolf, arts administrator for the city.

"It makes me happy. I've gone three times," Wolf said about the exhibition. "I also like the fact that because there are five projects in close proximity it creates a visual impact."

She called the other piece that is illuminated at night, Ferrella's "Black Hawk Yahara: A River of Tears," elegant, poignant and thoughtful — a piece she would like to see up all year.

Ferrella said his project — for which he strung a maple tree with close to 350 willow branches that had been dyed-red — ties the river in with its bloody history as it pertains to Chief Black Hawk and a massacre that took place on the Mississippi River, which is part of the same watershed.

The U.S. Army gunned down 250 Indians, mainly women and children, as they were trying to surrender, said Ferrella, who researched the history.

“To me, this piece was about the blood on the landscape, and the juxtaposition of our beautiful landscape that is nice and green and peaceful,” he said.

Murphy’s faceless figure stirred up some debate between Jerry Lowrie, 43, and Shari Jensen, 47, as they walked Lowrie’s dog across the bridge Sunday.

“I was startled,” said Lowrie. “I thought it was a real person initially. I thought it was a tad creepy.”

Jensen first saw it at night when the figure was glowing so she was aware that it wasn’t real. Still, there was a “nanosecond” of uncertainty, she said. “My initial instinct was not to go by it.”

The exhibit will be up until June 15. Descriptions of each artist’s work and a map of the installations can be found at www.yahara

[reflections.com](http://www.reflections.com).