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Mural project chosen to transform Metro 'bus barn'

Project by Jenie Gao to be funded by city's Percent for Art program

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Gao's art embodies the experience of bus riders, observing the passage of time.

Each day, thousands of commuters and visitors to Wisconsin's state Capitol pass the fading, beige edifice that is the Metro Transit Maintenance Facility. Occupying almost a full block of East Washington Avenue at South Ingersoll Street, the building has long served as the main hub of Madison's public transportation, housing all of Metro's buses.

Plans are in progress for an 8,000-square-foot mural by artist Jenie Gao to decorate its outer wall. Gao's **proposal "The Time is Ours,"** was recommended by the Madison Arts Commission above three other finalists and approved as the selection by the city council Nov. 1.

The project will receive funding from Madison's **Percent for Art program.** A 2017 ordinance pledged to set aside 1 percent of city spending on capital projects exceeding \$5 million for the purpose of public art. According to the **2021 Percent for Art Ordinance report,** \$132,000 has been allocated for the Metro transit facility.

Over the summer Gao interviewed city employees and 27 people who rely on buses. Of her interviewees, 70 percent identify as BIPOC. Gao, the only finalist of color, says their inclusion was integral to her decision to focus on the experience of bus riders.

The artwork "embodies the feeling that many bus riders express that even people with the longest commutes feel ownership over their time spent in transit," Gao said at a Sept. 7 Madison Arts Commission **meeting.** "They don't have to mind traffic and the time is theirs to reflect, to read, and to do as they choose. For many people, access to public transit means having independence."

The mural is composed of four sections connected with aluminum silhouettes of people waiting in a bus shelter. These figures observe the passing of the seasons, represented by the first spring crocuses, sunflowers and cicadas, fluffy milkweed and migrating geese, and snow.



Madison Arts Commission administrator Karin Wolf says the public response to the proposals “was very robust and rewarding.” The public comment form yielded 39 pages of feedback for all four proposals, and community members also emailed the Madison Arts Commission. Many comments supported Gao’s project and its focus on diversity. State Rep. Francesca Hong (D-Madison) wrote in an email that she didn’t think “any of the other finalists measure up to Jenie in artistic design, ethical considerations, community involvement or economic impact.”

Wisconsin once had a statewide Percent for Art Program that dedicated 0.2 percent of the construction budget for selected new state buildings or renovations for public art projects, but Gov. Scott Walker’s administration eliminated the program in 2011. Wisconsin currently ranks last in the nation for arts and culture funding, according to the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies. Madison is the first city in the state to institute a percent for art program since.

Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway says the ordinance aims to produce more public work like the Metro project.

“It’s really important for us to include art in public spaces because it sends a signal to the community that we care. We care about how things look, we care about investing in arts and culture, we care about investing in artists, and we care about beautifying our city,” Rhodes-Conway tells *Isthmus*.

Public art projects like the Metro Transit center also benefit tourism, adds the mayor. “In the travel industry, they call them the Instagram moments, they’re the places people stop and take a picture.”

For Jessy Stammer, Metro Transit marketing and customer service manager, the project is a way to turn the Metro facility, which she describes as a “giant, empty canvas,” into an arts space.

“We’ve been here and watched the development that’s happened on East Washington and all around us, and we’ve kind of stayed stagnant,” says Stammer. “This is a big opportunity for us to be a part of our community and our neighborhood again.”

A few possible stumbling blocks may lie ahead. Wolf is concerned that inflation could drive up the cost of materials like aluminum. Also, the design Gao submitted is for the lower half of the building, which could potentially be refaced in the next stage of the Metro facility upgrade. Beneath the building’s perforated metal siding are old brick and windows. Changes of the facing or new exposure of the old surfaces could impact Gao’s design; it might end up smaller in scope or on a different part of the building.

“This is a fixed budget,” Wolf says. “I’m worried about that because it often takes a

long time to execute a project with the city. An artist has to be just very nimble and flexible and move with the project as it evolves.”

Wolf says the Madison Arts Commission will work with the city’s transportation and engineering departments to refine Gao’s designs in the coming months.



Jenie Gao

“I want people to try to suspend expectations and just see what evolves,” says Wolf. “And it’ll be gorgeous, because she’s a good artist.”

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