

A guide for touring public art on Madison's near east side

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Arts

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Her hair swirls and sparkles for 75 feet. She is bare-chested, and so is her twin. All who pass by the busiest shop in Madison's Williamson-Marquette (Wil-Mar) neighborhood see these mysterious women. They are the food co-op's mural.

The Willy Street Co-op's painted wall is the newest public art addition to the Wil-Mar area. The piece joins several others, illustrating for residents and visitors the creative culture of the isthmus neighborhood and of Madison itself.

For about a mile's worth of walking, beginning at the neighborhood's welcome sign and ending at the home of a local sculptor, you can glimpse the quirky, the quiet, the garish, and the majestic.

At the neighborhood's welcome sign, you'll notice a sculpture that many drivers overlook. It is tucked into a triangular park and set back from the road. Its color and shape simultaneously evoke an industrial warehouse and Dr. Seuss. This is good preparation for experiencing Wil-Mar. The area's factory-filled past is evident to the alert walker, as is the strange and creative mixture of current residents.

Strolling from the sculpture down to B.B. Clarke Beach, you'll take in your widest view of Lake Monona on this art tour. Feel free to stop and sit awhile. The benches, a mix of wood, metal, and whimsy, hint at the metalwork to come. Madison metal artist Erika Koivunen created the benches at the request of the Marquette Neighborhood Association and they were installed in 2009.

The Marquette Neighborhood Association's Art and Culture Committee initiates many of the area's public art projects. The sidewalk poetry marked on the tour map is another example of their work, as is the food co-op's mural.

Some of Wil-Mar's public art, however, was born out a single citizen's vision for beautification. The Dreamkeepers, for example, that tower over passersby on Paterson St., were commissioned by former Madison business owner Don Warren. The two metal birds, made by Wisconsin artist Tom Every, continue to mix the industrial and the creative. Though a giant recycled metal bird could appear robotic or Frankenstein-esque, these sculptures lean more into fantasy than science fiction. The 30-foot pair flaunt their creator's detailed imagination.

Another man's imagination, Mother Fool's coffee shop co-owner Jon Hain, is splashed on the side of his boxy brick cafe. Hain and his partner Stephanie Rearick invite graffiti artists to paint their east-facing outside wall. Since the first graffiti mural in 2001, Mother Fools' brick wall has gleamed with the spray paint of more than 50 artists. The rules? No sex imagery, no racism, no commercial messages. Spray paint only.

"For people that do graffiti or illegal art, everything is done in a rush because it's dangerous," Hain said. But on his wall, they have time and encouragement.

"People can become the artist they are, take time to work their art out for a whole afternoon," Hain said. "I think of the mural as a skills building space."

Perhaps artists building their style on Mother Fools' wall will polish their craft to the level evident a block and a half down at the Willy Street Co-op where Brazilian artist Pannela Castro sprayed her internationally lauded style in the summer of 2012. Castro's work appears in Paris, Johannesburg, New York, Sao Paolo and Prague among other cities. In her statement about the co-op's mural, she wrote: "Utopia, the name of this mural, refers to a distant myth about a strong woman who lives in a free society."

She completed Utopia in a week and a half of painting. Willy Street Co-op's Director of Communications Brendon Smith said "the color and the long and graceful forms" brighten both the 125-foot wall and the entire block.

