

The man in the photograph, a big guy in an undershirt and oomr rows, is flat on his back, getting swathed in white cloth. A crowd is gathered around him; some look amused, some bemused, some are intent on the proceedings. In the background are the faded red-brick buildings of the South Bronx. In another photo, a man in a T-shirt and Yankees cap pours white goop from a green plastic bowl onto the man wrapped in white, to the amusement of the kids and grinning, beer-drinking young men in the crowd. The man being covered in plaster is Pedro Contano; the two men working on him are artist John Ahearn and his assistant Rigoberto Torres. This — the making of a plaster cast as well as the finished product — is public art.

The bust of Pedro Contano and the photographs documenting its casting are part of an exhibition at the University of Illinois' Gallery 400 called **Sites and Solutions: Recent Public Art**. Judith Tannenbaum, director of the Freedman Gallery of Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania, is the curator of the show and discussed it when she was in town this week.

"The exhibit is in honor of Doris Chanin Freedman, an alumna of Albright and an activist in public contemporary art. She strongly believed that quality contemporary art should be made available to people in their daily life and not isolated in galleries and private collections," Tannenbaum said. Freedman was involved in many major public art works, including projects in New York City, where she served briefly as director of cultural affairs. She died in 1981. "She was the generating point for this exhibit. I felt strongly when she died that we should do something in public art in her honor," Tannenbaum said.

However, Tannenbaum herself had "mixed feelings" about public art, she said. "I was sympathetic in principle, but I was aware of many cases where public art was the work of second- or third-rate abstract artists who represented a compromise for those who cared about the art and at the same time were resented by the locals, who wanted representational art or something that related to their community. And there are political issues involved where people are going to be exposed to art whether they like it or not. It's often controversial, deservedly so, particularly if it's publicly funded. But even if it's privately funded, there is the question of an unwilling

or uncommitted audience." Even "quality works were often placed without much regard for the site or the audience, she found. In one case a large sculpture had been put in a plaza that had been the site of concerts and other activities; the public, not consulted, didn't want this piece of public art that took away a popular gathering place. In other cases, sculptures — good and bad ones — were plunked down in plazas or other sites that didn't fit them well. Finally, Tannenbaum found a great deal of money "being poured into mediocre projects." Although she didn't see all public art as "turds in plazas," as Tom Wolfe characterized it, she had reservations.

So when Tannenbaum began work on the exhibit, she sought public art that didn't fit the old patterns. "I decided not to look at works created for museums or other collections but to concentrate on accessible public places such as recreation areas, office buildings, streets, neighborhoods. I chose works from 1980 to the present that reflect the shift away from abstract sculptural forms in front of a building or plaza." She looked for art that was well integrated into its site, artists working in less traditional media, and a concern on the part of the artist and those choosing the art for the potential audience.

She came up with works like the plaster casts of Ahearn, a South Bronx resident whose "lifecasts" are attached to the exteriors of buildings in the neighborhoods in which they were made. These casts fulfilled many of the criteria Tannenbaum was seeking. They clearly fit their settings: they were casts of the people who lived on the sites. (Many of the casts are made so that when placed on the sides of buildings they look like people leaning against or sitting on their windowsills, watching the goings-on below.) They weren't imposed on an audience who had nothing to say about them — they were built with the cooperation and participation of the audience.

One of the artists in the show whose work is very closely related to its site is Bill Brand, a filmmaker who created **Mastranscscope**. Brand's flip-flopped the traditional method of animation — moving pictures in front of people — by arranging to move people in front of pictures. His 300-foot-long work is divided into 228 hand-painted panels on a New York City subway wall. As passengers ride by in the trains, the pictures become an animated movie for them. Brand spent a lot of time on the subway platform timing and

measuring trains so that **Mastranscscope** would work right. Artists who have unusual works in mind sometimes have difficulty getting access to public places. Harriet Feigenbaum has solved the problem by choosing an eyesore to work on. She has planted black walnut, pine, and grapevines in patterns on a vacant strip mine site outside of Scranton, Pennsylvania. This land reclamation project, on plots visible from a nearby highway, was funded by local and state arts councils.

Even in more traditional types of public art — vertical sculptures in plazas, memorials and monuments, murals — Tannenbaum found innovation and sensitivity to the work's site. The trompe l'oeil murals of Richard Haas, for example, often incorporate elements of the building's design or symbols from the neighborhood or city. A Haas mural on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia depicts several of the city's monuments as well as repeating a bus awning and decoration from the building itself. His mural on the Reliable Corporation building, on Van Buren west of the Loop, was also designed to incorporate city history.

Many artists are working with architects, designers, and audiences at much earlier stages, again striving to make the work integral to its physical site and acceptable to the community. Sculptor Luis Jimenez was commissioned to do a work for Fargo, North Dakota. He planned a sculpture of two square dancers; the locals didn't much like it. He agreed to consider their reservations and ended up scrapping his original idea and coming up with a new one. His muscular **Sodbuster** depicts a man behind an ox-drawn plow. His willingness to change his plans is a far cry from the "high-handed" imposition of a work on a community that is often the rule in public art, Tannenbaum said.

Although there is still plenty of public art loathed by the public and disdained by the art community, Tannenbaum is much more optimistic about the field than she used to be. "I think the public is much more accepting when a piece has relevancy to the site," she said. "The question now is what kind, not should we have public art?"

Sites and Solutions: Recent Public Art, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, will be on display at Gallery 400, Van Buren and Peoria, through February 2. Hours are 12-5 Tuesday-Saturday; 996-6114.

—Lillian Thomas