



THE PHILADELPHIA (MURALS) STORY

You don't have to be in Philadelphia for long before you start noticing the murals. Every city has at least a few. Some have hundreds. But all told — large, small, outdoors, indoors, in subway stations, and everywhere in between — Philly has more than 3,000.

That they exist in such abundance is thanks to Mural Arts Philadelphia (MAP). Born of an anti-graffiti program for youth 38 years ago, MAP has grown into America's largest public-arts organization and a national model. Occasionally it commissions a name artist to create a mural. Early on, Keith Haring (1958–1990) painted one on the side of a house in South Philly. Completed in 1987 and restored in 2013, it is a quintessential Haring composition of gyrating, roly-poly stick figures and one of his barking dogs. In 2019, Amy Sherald (b. 1973), Michelle Obama's official portraitist, designed a likeness of a 19-year-old North Philly woman, Najee Spencer-Young, that was painted on the side of a six-story Target store. "I call her Philadelphia's Mona Lisa," says Tish Byrne, who leads walking tours of the city's murals. Posed against an aquamarine background, Spencer-Young wears a coat boldly printed in black-and-white flowers and a hat cocked to one side. Her face is serene. Her African American skin is silvery gray — Sherald's signature way of, as she has said, removing "color" from "race."

More often, though, a mural is produced by a public-art specialist. Either way, input is solicited from residents of the community where the mural will reside. Often those residents, including children and teams of students, help with the execution. So do recovering addicts, unhoused people, incarcerated individuals, those re-entering society from prison, and those struggling with physical or mental health. In this way, 50 to 75 murals are added each year. Meanwhile, others are destroyed or obstructed by new development, lost due to property owners' decisions, or simply erased by the elements.

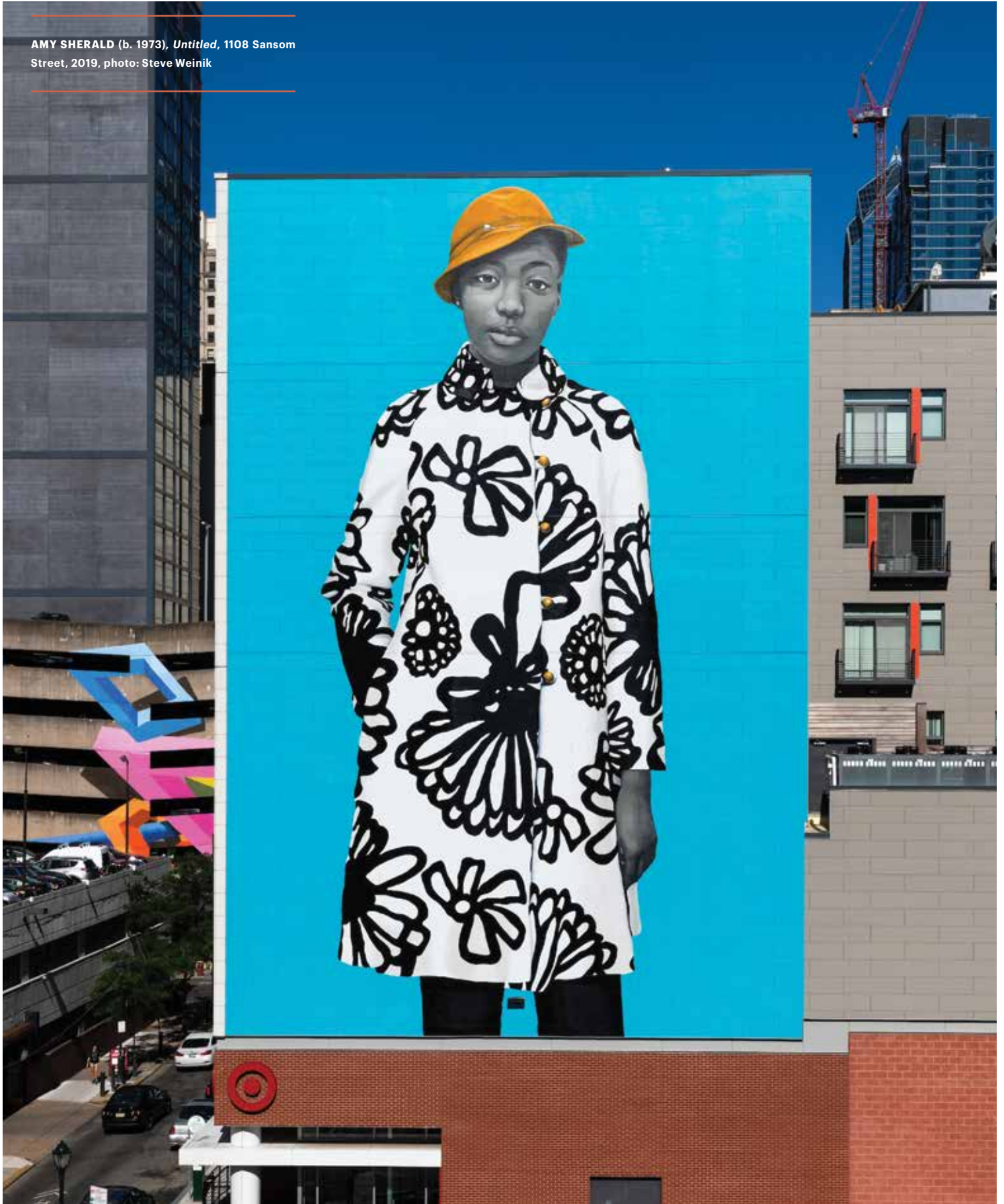
Some art lovers aren't keen on murals. They're more about politics than paint, they argue. Nonetheless, the community-building aspects of murals are considered by MAP to be just as important as their aesthetics. "Mural Arts Philadelphia is a multi-tasker," Jane Golden, its founder and still its executive director, told a crowd at an unveiling this past October. "People ask me, 'Is it an arts program? Is it a social services program?' Who cares? We want to stretch art as far as it will go." Later, in an interview, Golden says, "We believe that art can be useful. We believe that it can be beautiful. It's not an either-or." Fortuitously, at Stanford University in the 1970s Golden studied both studio art and political science, as if her career path were preordained.

"GRAFFITI CITY"

The story of Philly's murals begins with graffiti. In the 1960s, the city was being defaced epically by graffiti writers. It was happening in other cities, too. Kids were spray-painting buildings, buses, bridge girders, and everything else with their balloon-lettered pseudonyms. It is often pointed out that graffiti writing is as old as cave painting. However, a Philadelphian, Darryl McCray (b. 1953), is regularly cited as the world's first modern graffiti writer. He began his "career" in 1965 while housed in a juvenile corrections facility, where the cooks nicknamed him "Cornbread" — one of his favorite foods. As the story goes, he wrote the moniker throughout the place. When released, he wrote it all over the city. When he "tagged" an elephant at the Philadelphia Zoo with "Cornbread Lives," the media made him a celebrity.

To be sure, the graffiti writers of that period had a certain energy. The most prolific of them made you wonder: How were they everywhere? How did they get their tags up so high? It could be awe-inspiring, but mostly it was awful, especially if your property was being vandalized. Then it became alarming when, in the 1970s, graffiti writing became associated with gangs.

AMY SHERALD (b. 1973), *Untitled*, 1108 Sansom Street, 2019, photo: Steve Weink





KENT TWITCHELL (b. 1942), *Dr. J.*, 1226 Ridge Avenue, 1990, photo: Jack Ramsdale

In 1984, W. Wilson Goode was elected mayor partly as a result of his anti-graffiti platform. Laws restricting spray-paint sales to minors had been useless against shoplifters. No more effective was legislation making penalties for graffiti writing severe. Meanwhile, Jane Golden, a New Jersey native, had moved back east due to ill health. She had been working as a muralist in Los Angeles with Judith Baca (the “Mother of American Muralism”), who founded that city’s first mural program in 1974. After Goode’s win, he offered Golden a part-time job helping to establish an Anti-Graffiti Network. The idea was that graffiti writers, to earn amnesty from prosecution for past infractions, would whitewash graffiti — their own or others’. But when Golden realized that some graffiti writers had genuine talent, she transformed the network into an entity that wasn’t “anti” anything. Instead, it was pro-art.

THE “DR. J” EFFECT

Mayor Goode eventually hired Golden full-time and a mural-making program was formed. By 1990, however, she wanted to improve the quality and variety of what was being produced. The early murals were “always spirited,” but not always good, she told the crowd at the unveiling in October. Realizing she needed a “breakthrough mural,” she convinced California muralist Kent Twitchell (b. 1942) to produce one.

Twitchell had mentored Golden when she was working on the West Coast. His usual fee was more than \$40,000, but he agreed to paint one for Golden for \$2,000 — the amount of a small grant she had secured. The result was a three-story likeness of basketball star Julius Erving. Born in New York City, “Dr. J” played for the Philadelphia 76ers from 1976 through 1987. It was Twitchell’s idea that he paint Erving in a business suit and dress



MEG SALIGMAN (b. 1965), *Common Threads*, 525 North Broad Street, 1997, restored 2010, photo: Steve Weinik

shoes instead of team uniform and sneakers. He wanted people, especially youth, to see Erving as a man of many parts, not just an athlete.

To execute his design, Twitchell implemented a novel technique. He painted the image on squares of so-called parachute cloth, a non-woven polyester fabric. He used acrylic gel to affix the squares to the building’s stucco surface. This allowed him to do a lot of the work in California and also to render Dr. J in exquisite, realistic detail: his trousers’ creases and wrinkles, metal-rimmed aviator glasses, gold bracelet, folded pocket handkerchief — and the illusion of his cast shadow.

The success of the Dr. J mural gave the program art-world credibility, making it easier for Golden to secure subsequent grants and foundation money. Then, in 1996, the nonprofit Philadelphia Mural Arts Advocates was incorporated to support it. A steadier money stream meant the muralists could erect proper scaffolding. They could rent mobile elevating work platforms (“cherry pickers”) and other heavy equipment. And they could use paint formulated for murals instead of the cheap cans found at the back of the hardware store.

In 2001, MAP moved its headquarters to the former studio-residence of the great painter and educator Thomas Eakins (1844–1916). By then, its after-school and summer art education programs had been inaugurated. So had its partnership with the city’s Department of Human Services. Bringing the art-making process to “underserved” groups has shaped much of what the organization has done ever since.

“GO BIG”

Meg Saligman (b. 1965), a Philadelphian for more than 30 years but originally from Olean, New York, has produced public artworks worldwide. She



CESAR VIVEROS (b. 1968), *The Sacred Now: Faith and Family in the 21st Century*, 1012 West Thompson Street, 2015, photo: Steve Weinik



EDGAR "SANER" FLORES (b. 1981), *Philos Adelpbos* (detail), 440 Poplar Street, 2015, photo: Steve Weinik

is also the one who, having been taught by Twitchell how to do the parachute-cloth method of mural-making, adapted it for wide use. Dramatic, polychromatic, almost, one could say, operatic, Saligman's works often depict multiple characters, some real, others imagined. And they are huge. A self-described "mega-scale muralist," she has painted three of the largest murals in the country, the largest of which, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, measures 44,000 square feet.

One of her Philadelphia works is the eight-story *Common Threads*, a commingling of 31 figures, some based on high school students, others on Saligman's grandmother's collection of china figurines. At top center is Tameka Jones at age 17, when she was studying at the Philadelphia High School for Creative and Performing Arts. Looking out across the city meditatively, the young woman of color with her long, braided hair contrasts sharply with the antique fashions and effete poses of the figurines. Yet the piece's title seems to say we are all connected across cultures and time through our common humanity.



DAVID MCSHANE (b. 1965), *Jackie Robinson*, 2803 North Broad Street, 1997, restored 2015. Visible above the rooftop is part of James Burns's *North Philadelphia Beacon Project*, 2701 North Broad Street, 2013. Photo: Steve Weinik

Saligman completed *Common Threads* in 1997, after eight months' work. She painted directly on the wall because its surface wouldn't take parachute cloth. (Others, among them Sherald's Najee Spencer-Young, have been painted directly for the same reason.) These projects are plain air to the extreme: weather must be reckoned with. What's more, every day is studio-critique day when anyone walking, jogging, or driving by can stop and voice an opinion. Yet the muralists say interacting with passersby, some of whom don't get many opportunities to engage with art or artists, can be the most rewarding part of public mural-making.

Three months into her work on *Common Threads*, Saligman was paid a visit by Cesar Viveros (b. 1968), newly arrived from Mexico. "He came by every day after that," she recalls. "Eventually I took him on as a volunteer. He finished *Common Threads* with me, then worked with me for 10 years. Now he's on his own and doing great things in North Philly." One of Viveros's works in that neighborhood is *The Sacred Now*, designed and executed in time for the World Meeting of Families and Pope Francis's visit in



PHILLIP ADAMS (b. 1978), *Leviathan Main Belting*, 1241 Carpenter Street, 2016, photo: Steve Weinik ■ **PHILLIP ADAMS** (b. 1978), *Baldwin Locomotive Works*, 417 North 20th Street, 2019, photo: Steve Weinik



Currently communities apply to have a mural created by MAP. The demand is great in neighborhoods where loss of Philly's core industries has resulted in urban ruins. MAP then finds the funding necessary. Before work can begin, though, community meetings determine the mural's subject matter and style. Balancing the two — art values and social values — is often complicated, even before technical aspects of the project are addressed. "Sometimes these values can actually be in conflict," Golden says. But a process that allows time for plenty of discourse is the way to bring them into proper balance. It is, however, "not mural by committee," Saligman observes. "I am a painter of what the community brings to me. But you want your artist to create something only they could create with that community." Rather than being a "vessel for a vision," she considers herself "a vessel with a vision."

PHILLY'S MANY FRANKS

One of Philly's best loved murals has become, like Saligman's *Common Threads*, a landmark. On the side of a North Philly residence, it is *Jackie Robinson*, completed in 1997 by David McShane (b. 1965), a long-time MAP staff artist who trained as an oil painter and has done more than 200 murals in Philadelphia alone. In 1947, Robinson had become the first African American to play Major League Baseball. McShane executed his tribute to the Brooklyn Dodgers star in what he calls "an abstract series of hard-edged shapes." He painted them directly on the building's surface and entirely in five shades of gray. His technique resulted in a picture that appears to be black and white. McShane says the palette and its effect were meant as a reminder of the racial division that Robinson helped overcome. He also wanted it

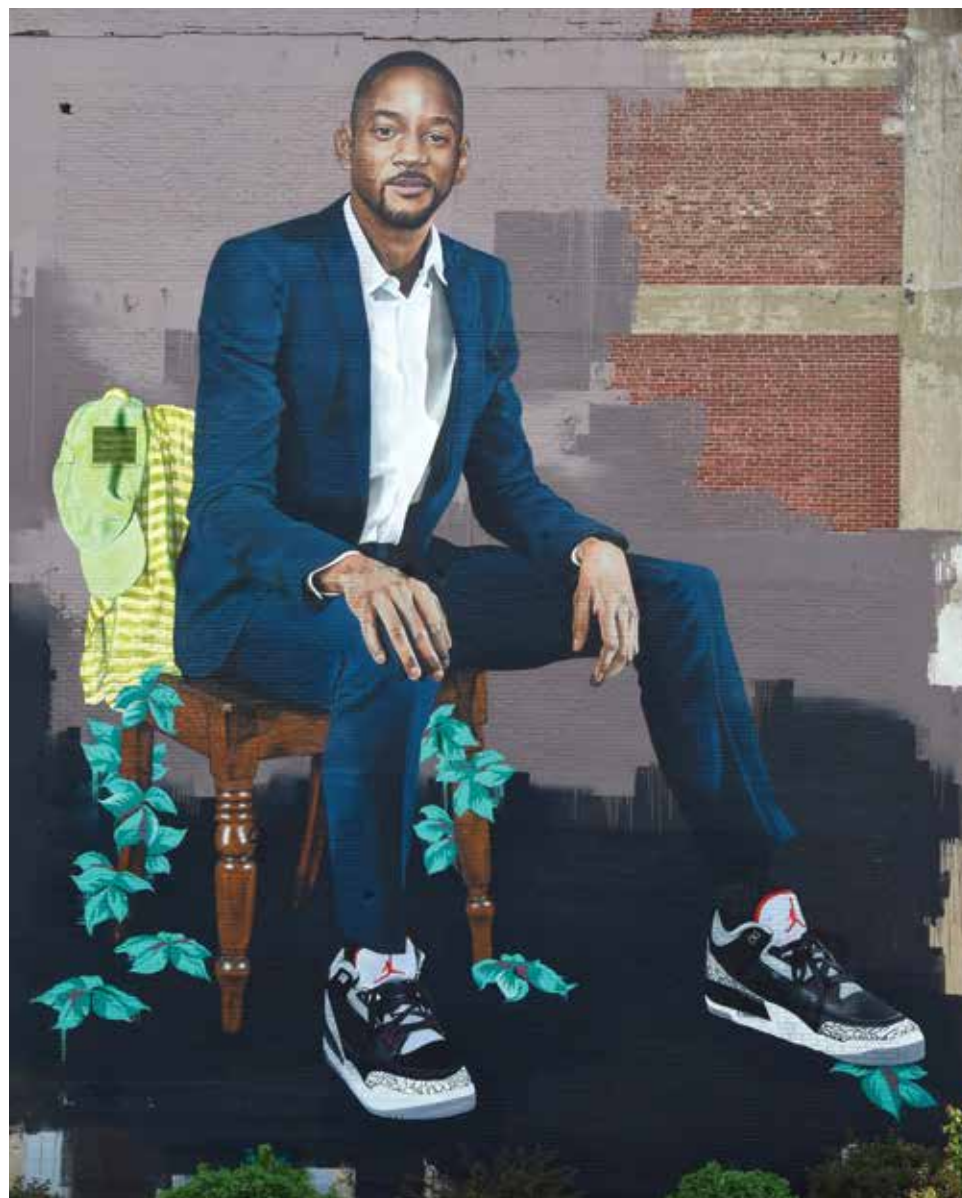
to hark back to the era of news photographs before color printing. Indeed, he based his design on news images of Robinson — characteristically stealing home, which he did most memorably during the 1955 World Series, won by the Dodgers against the Yankees.

2015. It consists of 153 individual painted panels, installed across the facade of a Catholic school. The public was invited to a series of "community paint days," a concept Saligman pioneered. As she explains it, an artist creates a design, transfers it to multiple sections, and labels each; the community colors them in paint-by-numbers style. They are then applied to the wall. In this way, approximately 2,000 people helped paint *The Sacred Now*, and Pope Francis signed it.

That same year, Mexican street artist Edgar "Saner" Flores (b. 1981) visited Philadelphia to open his gallery exhibition *Fragments of the Soul* — murals, illustrations, video projections, and paintings created on material salvaged in Philly. During his stay, using only spray paint, he created *Philos Adelfos* ("Brotherly Love") on the side of a three-story apartment building in the North Liberties neighborhood. The image shows a man and woman in turquoise masquerade masks embracing behind a foreground of fuchsia-colored leaves. Above them, a liberty bell bears the city motto of his title. It took Flores only three days to complete this mural. It is far more common for the mural-making process to take months, as Saligman's works do, or even longer, if the community design phase is protracted.

Another celebrated work by McShane, in the Midtown Village neighborhood, is *Famous Franks*, a montage of Philadelphia's many Franks and others who share the name. McShane painted it in 2001 on wooden sign-painter's panels fitted to cover the windows of a bar known as Dirty Frank's. Naturally Ben Franklin is among the group; so are Frankie Avalon, Frankenstein's monster, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Frank Zappa, Frank Sinatra, Saint Francis of Assisi (for whom the artist used his twin brother, Frank, as a model), Frank Perdue, and Frank Lloyd Wright. And when Pope Francis visited, McShane added him.

Frank Rizzo, the city's police commissioner who was elected mayor in 1972, did not find a place in McShane's pantheon. The gay community in that neighborhood vociferously nixed him, citing Rizzo's bigoted views and actions. Rizzo was, however, painted by another muralist in 1995 in South Philly's Italian Market area after MAP received petitions advocating for it.



RICHARD WILSON (b. 1974), *Will Smith*, 4545 West Girard Avenue, 2018, photo courtesy of the artist

The image of the deeply polarizing figure was frequently vandalized, however, and during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, *A Tribute to Frank Rizzo* was whitewashed by the building's owner.

REMEMBRANCE OF INDUSTRIAL THINGS PAST

Frank Rizzo ruled when the city was in the throes of the socioeconomic upheaval that followed the loss of its traditional industries. Phillip Adams (b. 1978) has chronicled those industries in a mural series, *Industrious Light*. Mills, factories, and warehouses, some abandoned, others repurposed, have been his “canvases.” He completed the first, *Ortlieb's Brewery*, in 2014. Drawing directly with charcoal on a massive wall overlooking the defunct brewery's remains, Adams depicted the tools of the brewing trade. He says he chose charcoal because, being carbon, it linked the mural's medium to the materials of the industrial past. Charcoal is also conducive to spontaneity: “You can make changes until you seal it.” As an added bonus, charcoal doesn't fade, as even high-quality exterior paint does. “The longevity of art in the public sphere has been one of the more interesting things for me to think about during my work on these projects,” Adams notes.

In 2017, new construction blocked a clear view of *Ortlieb's Brewery*. By then, Adams had completed an homage to Leviathan Belting, a company whose massive leather belts were used to run machinery for all kinds of industries. The site is a former Leviathan warehouse, which now contains studio spaces for artists and makers, as well as offices for small-business

incubators. Its owner, Steven Krupnick, worked on the design with Adams; they then introduced the concept to the community. The trompe l'oeil depiction of gears, belts, and other symbols of industry — part charcoal, part Benjamin Moore paint — wraps around the whole four-story building.

The most recent mural in Adams's series, completed in 2019, is *Baldwin Locomotive Works*. It's on the side of a building in the Logan Park neighborhood once dominated by the manufacturer. Adams used the parachute-cloth method to paint a head-on view of the experimental steam Baldwin 60000 Locomotive (now housed at Philadelphia's Franklin Institute). Area residents used the same method to paint a foreground of pink azaleas during a community paint day in nearby Baldwin Park. That section includes an acknowledgement of Philly's earlier past: references to the Lenni Lenape, the Indigenous people who lived on this land before colonization.

“CITY OF MURALS”

Steve Powers (b. 1968) was a teenaged graffiti writer when the Anti-Graffiti Network was launched. Twenty-five years later, in the summer of 2009, the West Philly native returned as an established studio artist. He brought 1,200 cans of spray paint, 800 gallons of paint, and 20 assistants. Together they create a series of 50 rooftop murals facing an elevated portion of Philly's subway line. The result, *A Love Letter for You*, transformed a 20-block stretch with lines like “Forever Begins When You Say Yes.”

In 2018, another former graffiti writer, London's Richard Wilson (b. 1974), took it upon himself to paint a mural of West Philly native and actor Will Smith. Wilson has said he got the inspiration for its style from the official presidential portrait of Barack Obama by Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977). “I added some leaves as a clear reference [to the Wiley image],” he told TV news when it was unveiled. At 65 feet high, the Smith mural is seen

daily by students attending a nearby kindergarten-through-eighth-grade charter school. Wilson worked with the school and with MAP to secure this West Philly site and offer community engagement on the project. In a documentary, the artist recalled that Twitchell's *Dr. J* inspired him as a kid, citing “what that did to ignite the fire and desire for elevation” in him. The plan is that the Smith mural will be similarly inspiring.

Today, graffiti artists, as opposed to graffiti writers (persistent as ever, alas), show their work in museums. So do muralists, as they have done since well before the heyday of Diego Rivera (1886–1957). In 2013 MAP got its own museum recognition when the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts mounted *Beyond the Paint*, a retrospective exhibition of the organization that has earned Philly an official new nickname: “City of Murals.” It also has an unofficial one, “The Motown of Murals,” coined by Meg Saligman, who credits Jane Golden for making Philly a place that welcomes artists, allowing them to have careers, mentor others, and make a difference. In addition, the city welcomes all art lovers to come discover its wealth of murals for themselves. ●

Information: muralarts.org

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