

Spinning poles capture the colours of Afghan blankets in Commonwealth Rec Centre atrium art

BY FISH GRIWKOWSKY, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM APRIL 6, 2012



Located in Commonwealth Community Rec Centre, the new piece of Edmonton public art Afghan Mural was created by Toronto/Vancouver art collective Instant Coffee. The work is interactive: each of its columns can be rotated to create a mix-and-match picture of various handmade blankets.

Photograph by: Fish Griwkowsky, Fish Griwkowsky

EDMONTON - Afghan Mural is a photographic work with a twist — literally.

While public art's nature is often at least potentially hands-on, this new creation based on old craft insists on personal interaction. Adorning the front desk atrium of the new 220,000-sq.-ft. Commonwealth Community Rec Centre, 27 three-sided columns spin by hand into larger-than-life images of grandmotherly knit blankets.

It's like a huge, comforting puzzle, capturing the echo of our childhood couch landscapes.

Besides layering a sense of nostalgia and home onto the beautiful new facility, the piece's playfulness liberates a shifting format which typically holds us prisoner in roadside advertising.

The reproduced blankets' warmth and brightness contrast the white modern tiles they reside on, and,

even with the pool and indoor football field, this is easily the most colourful moment in a trip through the space. Best of all, it's fun to spin; a wordless Wheel of Fortune board.

Jinhan Ko is part of the Instant Coffee group that designed and installed Afghan Mural. Instant Coffee is a "service-oriented" artist collective based in Toronto and Vancouver. Its members have blended irony with concepts of folk architecture, advertising's bright colours and rescuing relics from, as Ko puts it, a "recent bygone era."

The 43-year-old is just the right age to be bridging artistic generations, keenly aware of something he calls geriatric chic— a concept recently riffed on at Jessica Kennedy's AGA Refinery party. Ko can see a familiar tradition in how Instant Coffee preserves a fading art form, and how Emily Carr built her painting career on the backs of sun-bleaching totem poles.

"For sure," he agrees. "I'm really interested in this geriatric chic. One of the things I'm coming to realize is aging is actually way more difficult than people get credit for. This bygone design, we're interested in this kind of cast-off materiality that's undervalued."

"When things become unwanted I feel they're ripe for art material."

Besides physically sitting on a growing collection of afghans as its six members scheme new ideas, Instant Coffee's imagery of these blankets have already skinned Vancouver trolley buses for a city-sponsored series intended to enliven grey streets. Part of that same project, one stated theme was "say nothing in bright colours" on a sandwich board.

This same tongue sits in cheek going back 12 years to their naming — "Instant Coffee" implying a replacement for something real.

"We're not perfect," Ko laughs. "The mantra in the beginning was if institutions aren't going to give us real shows, we'll just have our own in our studios. We weren't going to take no for an answer."

In Edmonton, Afghan Mural was originally intended to incorporate locally gathered blankets. A public call was sent out, but Vancouver's Ko admits the event thrown at a seniors' centre fell flat: "The truth of the matter is Edmonton's a big city. It's not always that tight knit and there are a lot of holes. It's not a criticism, it's how we are. Trying to collect the blankets is a nice idea

"We went for the design and more formal aspects instead of basing it on story. An interesting thing about this kind of craft is even in the '70s when they were popular, there was already an idea of globalized craft, patterns being shipped and so on. The idea of localized craft is really just that, an idea."

Ko gets back to mining the past to create the future. "I feel strongly about the missing of generations. One of the things we're trying to do is mix older artists with younger artists. We have so much to learn

from our elders, and also older artists need younger ones for their energy and insight, and for that go-get-it attitude.”

The interactive mural is made of thinly sliced photographs on vinyl, affixed to the waterjet aluminum which forms the rotatable columns. Grease and washers hidden in its frame keep the pieces rolling.

Selected by independent jury, Afghan Mural is part of the Edmonton’s Percent for Art policy to enhance local quality of life. Its \$41,000 commission covered fabrication, shipping, installation and artist fee. Besides Ko, Instant Coffee is Cecilia Berkovic, Kate Munro, Khan Lee, Kelly Lycan and Jenifer Papararo.

“We learn so much on a project like this,” says Ko of Instant Coffee’s first permanent piece of public art. “We had to become a cottage industry.”

Down at the rec centre stuck to the stadium, I saw a little boy who quickly recognized Afghan Mural as interactive, running up and moving the columns at his whim. His mother scolded him until she realized her mistake, and senior in a baseball cap joined in, turning, turning.

This moment seemed to encapsulate the theme, jocks with towels stopping and watching. Everyone seemed to feel at home.

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