

## Artist John Yancey on Community Engagement for *Legacy* at Rosedale Plaza Park

John Yancey received his BFA degree in painting and drawing from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1980) and an MFA from Georgia Southern University (1993). Yancey's work focuses in three main areas: paintings and drawings; community-based mural painting; and ceramic tile mosaic public art works. His most recent projects include permanent public artworks for the Austin Convention Center, The Henry B. Gonzales Convention Center of San Antonio, and the monumental history and culture art wall, "Rhapsody," on Austin's East Side. In addition to his public art projects, Yancey continues to exhibit his paintings and drawings in gallery and museum venues. He has also lectured extensively on various aspects of African American art history at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Terra Museum of American Art in Chicago, The Dallas Art Museum, Waterloo Museum of Art, Austin Museum of Art, and numerous other museum venues.



### **Public engagement can mean many things. Define community engagement through the lens of a public artist, and describe your approach to your own projects.**

Public engagement is a broad term that takes many forms from the inception to completion of a public art project. As an artist who deals primarily with community-based projects, this is an important component of my practice. Before applying for or accepting a project, I try to learn as much as possible about the immediate community, the primary audience for the work. I look for what I call "intersecting points" between my own artistic interests and directions and what would be most meaningful, significant, or powerful to that primary audience. If I find an intersection that is exciting to me, I build the project on that basis and then develop it with the community. I utilize engagement to define more specifically what is important to a community and what the project can symbolize, activate, or enhance. Then it is my job as the artist to design a project that incorporates community aspirations and my own artistic objectives.



### **How have you built trust with community members?**

The key principles in the way I build trust is respect and listening. I try to show respect by knowing as much as I can about the history, dynamics, and issues that are currently important to a community. I have found that when an artist has taken time to learn about a community before meeting, it is often interpreted as a sign of respect. Then it is important not to be so eager to impress that you use what you

have learned about a community to dominate a discussion because that might be interpreted as the artist (usually an outsider) acting like they know more about the history or community than its own members, a sign of disrespect. So, there is a fine line to be sensitive to when engaging in discussions. It is important to genuinely listen and engage in the true sense of the word with what is being expressed and communicated to you.

**Feedback is an important part of a public art project, but often, public input comes with many divergent viewpoints. How did you give all comments consideration while developing a cohesive design?**

Comments and viewpoints that are communicated by many people, especially over several occasions, carry more weight with me. A little local reconnaissance prior to discussions usually gives me a heads-up on any “hot button” or controversial issues that are currently or historically at play in a community. That said, if there are “hot button” or more difficult issues at play, they will come out in these dialogues whether the artist wants to deal with them or not. Prior research helps you to be prepared to respond to, incorporate, massage or, if necessary, deflect viewpoints that are inconsistent with or detrimental to the direction, integrity, intent, or overall objectives of the project. It’s always a case-by-case situation, but the main thing is all viewpoints must be genuinely listened to and given room to fully be expressed, even if they are not going to be incorporated into the design.

**Though artwork often reflects the time in which it was made, how did you consider the future of your public art in the area/community it serves? What were your concerns when considering how the work would grow with the community over time?**

This issue is pertinent now more than ever. Historically stable communities are falling prey to gentrification or other forces resulting in dramatic changes in its demography and character. Interurban and interregional migrations are increasing due to economic and political forces beyond the control of community members. While all communities will change over time to some degree in response to normal social and environmental conditions, the issue is more acute now due to the aforementioned factors. My approach is to find ways to express both celebration and commemoration into the design of my public art works. Celebrate what has been and what is with the conceptual understanding that it may one day be a proud and lasting commemoration of what a great community was but no longer is. One clarification: an important function of some painted community murals to respond to an immediate issue that is urgently impacting a community at that moment that may not be as relevant in future years, and these murals are not necessarily meant to have permanence over time.



**What’s the biggest challenge/reward working with a community collaboratively?**

The biggest challenge for me when working with a community is encountering contentiously differing views or objectives from vying constituencies of community members. These conflicts are almost always beyond the artist’s ability to resolve and create a challenge of finesse that usually has mixed reactions. In those cases, I try to prioritize the most primary audience if possible, or the people who will be looking at and living most closely with the artwork every day. Still, this is a case-by-case situation. My biggest reward is when the artwork is dedicated. The event must represent a handing over of “ownership” and stewardship of the artwork to the community. By nature, these ceremonies will always showcase local political figures and leaders, but it is important that they not be the focus of the event. The dedication should be a community “party” that is a celebration of the people living there and the role the artwork will hopefully play in their daily lives and the lives of their progeny. When the dedication works how it should, it is the most rewarding moment of a collaborative community project.