

# A Sense of Time, A Sense of Place

*A sense of scale and place is essential for public art. Artists who just enlarge studio art, or have it fabricated in a more permanent medium, don't understand what public art is all about. Public art forces the artist to interact with all kinds of people and consider many extra-art problems. You can't be hermetic. You have to get involved with communities. Public art is a mission.*  
Joyce Kozloff

*The artist's work must be uncensored, respected and tolerated, although deemed abhorrent or perceived as challenging, or experienced as threatening. . . . The work I make does not allow for experience outside the conventions of sculpture as sculpture. My audience is necessarily very limited.*  
Richard Serra

Both Joyce Kozloff and Richard Serra are known for their public art commissions: Kozloff for her vibrant, decorative ceramic tile and glass mosaic murals located in major urban transportation centers; Serra for his imposing, minimal sculptures fabricated from steel and placed in public plazas and art museums. If the process, style, and materials of their work do not philosophically anchor them at opposite ends of the public art spectrum, their above statements leave little room for doubt.

The austere, abstract work of Serra, and of many other artists who have come to the forefront since World War II, has been met with mounting criticism in recent years. Even as the public's appreciation and appetite for modern art heightens, it has become clear to both art and non-art audiences that large-scale, abstract works, while respected for their aesthetic rigor, often seem confrontational in their domination of site. This form of public art is, in fact, only "public" by virtue of its physical location; it rarely connects with the cultural history or values of the people who come into daily contact with it. According to Siah Armajani, one of public art's most visible advocates, "If public art is beyond comprehension, then it's not part of life."

In the past three years, much attention has been focused on what critic Douglas McGill has called "the new public art." This work is typified by Ned Smyth's *Upper Room*, created for lower Manhattan's enormously visible Battery Park City and designed by Cesar Pelli in association with artists Armajani and Scott Burton; or M.I.T.'s Weisner Building, designed by I. M. Pei in collaboration with Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischner.

Typically, the "new public art" combines the artist's personal style with literal or symbolic function and is, at least in concept, integrated physically and visually into its architectural site. When compared to more aggressive, monumental sculpture arbitrarily sited in outdoor urban plazas, corporate atriums, and highway intersections, it seems a humanizing art whose intention is to commemorate a shared activity, idea, or history.

# Joyce Kozloff's Decorative Murals

Mason Riddle

The most commonly cited practitioners of this architecturally based art, which frequently doubles as furniture, passageways, or public meeting places, include Armajani, Burton, Fleischner, Mary Miss, Nancy Holt, and Andrew Leicester, among others. Theirs is an art that may barely distinguish itself from its site because of its ability to be traversed, sat upon, or experienced in some way other than just visually. For Armajani, public art "should not intimidate or assault or control the public. It should be neighborly. It should enhance a given place. The word 'art' in public art is not a genteel art. It is a missionary art. The public artist is a citizen first. There is no room for self-expression."

In light of public art's heightened visibility and popularity in the 1980s, it is odd that Kozloff's public art commissions have rarely, if ever, been discussed in the company of work by the artists mentioned above. This omission is noteworthy because Kozloff's philosophy, if not the style of her projects, clearly aligns itself with theirs. Like Armajani, she sees public art as a "mission" and recognizes that it must be "comprehensible" to the public in some meaningful fashion.

Perhaps this omission can be attributed to the fact that none of her murals are in New York City. Or that they are created from ceramic tile and glass mosaic instead of stone, marble, wood, or steel, and can only be "read" instead of "used." Perhaps it is because her work is vividly hued, intentionally decorative, and incorporates pattern and representational imagery. Unlike the work of these other artists, Kozloff's murals are not characterized by an austere, refined appearance—one that inextricably links such works, at least visually, to the rarified tradition of modern art.

Kozloff's evolution from a 1960s abstract painter into a 1970s Pattern and Decoration artist into a 1980s public artist using traditional craft materials has been well documented. Her passion for architectural ornamentation and decorative ceramic tiles is also well known. For the latter, Kozloff has traveled to Mexico, Morocco, Spain, and Turkey, among other countries, to sketch indigenous decorative tiles, which are later transformed into the underlying matrix of many of her works. For Kozloff, ornament and decoration are visual, but can also be "psychological, anthropological, philosophical, historical and sociological."

It has been said that ceramic tiles are like Rosetta Stones—they reveal the nature of the times and the culture in which they are produced. That Kozloff has selected this medium for her murals is not surprising, given the millennium-old tradition of glazed ceramic tile in public places. What *is* surprising is that she has used the medium to reinforce the values of cultural history in contemporary times.

In fact, it is the ceramic tile and glass mosaic media that initially give Kozloff's pieces their public accessibility. Most people relate naturally to ceramic work—to its familiar forms and its glazed, tactile surfaces. The long-standing tradition of ceramic tiles,



ranging from the 2,500-year-old Ishtar Gate to contemporary bathroom floors, lends a nonthreatening familiarity to her work. The medium is also perfectly suited for representing those ideas and values that Kozloff wants to underscore. Tile-making is a pre-industrial process, one that often temporally matches the imagery and decorative patterning of her work. Like the stone furniture of Burton or the mixed stone and concrete meeting areas of Fleischner, Kozloff's works, although they are nonfunctional, are easily approached through the very materials from which they are made, and through the cultural associations they provoke. Unlike the work of Burton, Armajani, and Miss, however, Kozloff's public art commissions are distinguished by their direct visual ties to the communities in which they are sited. Located in urban transportation centers in cities as geographically diverse as Boston, Buffalo, Wilmington, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Detroit, the physical and cultural context of each of Kozloff's projects determine their ultimate shape and content. She describes her works as "individual portraits" of each city and believes that each commission can "only be as good as her sources."

For Kozloff, a site is a layering of history, rather than just a physical space. To ensure that a work is relevant to its site, both the past history and present-day activities of the city's residents are thoroughly investigated. Kozloff explores the demographic breakdown of the area, its economic heritage, and cultural development. For the latter, Kozloff locates historically significant buildings, uncovers local craft traditions, and rediscovers works of art that have been important to the cultural traditions of the city. That Kozloff integrates these cultural details into a decorative field of pattern and architectural ornamentation characteristic of non-Western cultures only adds to the visual and thematic complexity of her work. "I'm interested in the overlap of ideas and 'style' in art and architecture. A lot of artists have had it up to here with the purity bit," she remarks.

For example, her mural for Boston's Harvard Square Subway Station, *New England Decorative Arts*, explores through pattern and imagery the early visual traditions of America. Motifs of weather vanes, wall stencils, gravestones, folk art objects, naïve paintings, and eighteenth-century engravings of sailing ships have been integrated into a system of interlocking pattern and color that recalls Islamic tile work, but has the look of an Early American quilt.

However, Kozloff's sources are usually removed from the context of their original meanings when reinterpreted into her larger decorative schemes. Although the images and decorative motifs can be recognized as elements of a site's cultural fabric, their new public-art context allows multiple readings of the work. In *New England Decorative Arts*, the gravestones and sailing vessels no longer have the same spiritual or symbolic meaning they once did. Instead, they function as signs of a past tradition, not the

tradition itself. According to Kozloff, her sources are strictly a "visual experience."

Although Kozloff's murals all incorporate visual motifs relevant to site aspects, community, or cultural heritage, they have achieved varying degrees of success as works of public art. This is due in part to the physical sites themselves and in part to the artist's visual program.

In terms of physical and visual accessibility, the Harvard Square Subway Station mural is the least successful. Commissioned in 1979 and completed in 1985, the eight- by eighty-three-foot mural curves along a graded pedestrian ramp that connects subway tunnels to upper and lower bus terminals. The greatest problem is that there is no good vantage point from which to view the mural. On the lower, curving ramp one stands too low to adequately view the motifs. From the upper ramp the pedestrian is situated too far away to clearly interpret the succession of images. Consequently, *New England Decorative Arts* comes across as a blur of decorative tiles, defeating Kozloff's meticulous research and any clear reading of the subject matter. The pedestrians rushing to meet a Boston train take in little more than pattern and color.

Stylistically, of all the murals, *New England Decorative Arts* most closely resembles Kozloff's earlier large-scale paintings on canvas. (The tiles for *New England Decorative Arts* were fabricated to Kozloff's specifications at Brimstone Tile Works of Boulder, Colorado. Kozloff later painted and glazed the tiles in her New York studio.) Visually complex, with an edge-to-edge system of decorative patterning and steady stream of images, it has been likened to a painting stuck into the wall. Compositionally, it lacks the architectural rigor of some of her later pieces; but, ultimately, it is the poor siting of the piece that foils the "publicness" of its theme.

Although commissioned in 1982, Kozloff's ten- by fifty-one-foot mural for San Francisco's International Terminal was her first completed project. Opening in June 1983, *Bay Area Victorian*, *Bay Area Deco*, *Bay Area Funk* comprises three ceramic tile and glass mosaic medallions of different sizes, each of which depicts specific architectural and cultural periods of the city. The tiles were made, painted, and glazed by Kozloff and an assistant in her studio, while the mosaic was created specifically for the project by Crovatto Mosaics of Yonkers, New York. The medallions are set in a field of cobalt blue, commercially glazed tiles. The design of the San Francisco mural may be the least compelling of all of Kozloff's projects. Compositionally, the medallions appear as static, almost ponderous visual devices despite their vivid colors and reflective glass mosaic. While the painted images are initially engaging, even humorous, they come off as too illustrational or, as in the *Bay Area Funk* medallion, too corny to have any sustained impact. The density of Kozloff's formal system of patterning gives the mural a forced quality, rather than a graceful or resolved unfolding of decorative motifs.



When compared to the Boston site, the baggage claim site in San Francisco is well illuminated and physically accessible. Because it is situated behind the baggage claim carousel, however, the majority of travelers view the mural from a distance of several yards, making any reading of the small images impossible. Consequently, *Bay Area Victorian*, *Bay Area Deco*, *Bay Area Funk* functions, as does *New England Decorative Arts*, more as passive background decoration than as an active component of the architectural program.

More successful is Kozloff's 114-foot-long, two-story mural in Buffalo's Metro Rail Humboldt-Hospital station. Commissioned in 1982 and completed in 1984, the ceramic tile and glass mosaic mural combines architectural motifs from several of Buffalo's landmark buildings with decorative traditions of the Seneca Indians. Here, ceramic tile friezes of architectural ornamentation follow the severely angled path of the escalators, while framing several huge mosaic rondelles that appear suspended on the ochre field of commercially glazed tile. The tiles were fabricated to Kozloff's specifications by Firebird of Morristown, New Jersey, and subsequently painted and glazed by the artist in her studio. Kozloff's use of isolated decorative units in the Humboldt-Hospital station is more compositionally resolved and visually seductive than in San Francisco's International Terminal. However, the site itself is gainfully and cannot be seen clearly in its entirety, whether one is standing on the street or on the mezzanine level. Nevertheless, Kozloff's bold use of pattern and color, seen from the street through an exterior glass wall, invites the pedestrian inside. Once inside, one can examine various parts of the mural while ascending or descending the escalators.

In Buffalo, Kozloff's synthesis of diverse cultural motifs, decorative patterning, and vivid color is uncluttered and direct. The viewer can visually select individual elements without being overwhelmed by so many others. The piece also possesses an elegance and visual refinement that match the sources from which it is derived.

As a public artwork completely integrated into its site, Kozloff's floor-to-ceiling ceramic tile vestibule in Wilmington's Train station is a visual tour de force. Commissioned in 1980 and completed in 1983, *Homage to Frank Furness* is a marvelous synthesis of abstract tile-patterning and hand-painted architectural motifs. For her subject matter, Kozloff sketched some of Furness' well-known buildings, including the restored Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. She also researched extant drawings by Furness as well as historical photographs of his now demolished buildings. The 1908 Wilmington Train Station is one of Furness's last works and has been restored to its original integrity.

Upon entering the twenty- by thirty-foot space, one is impressed by the highly unified decorative surfaces, in spite of their rainbow of colors and myriad patterns. Set in multiple registers like stringcourses of brick in a building's façade, Kozloff's tiles are

painted with images of Victorian ornamental motifs by Furness and other period architects, and slowly emerge from the overall system of pattern.

As a work of art in a public space, *Homage to Frank Furness* is physically, visually, and intellectually accessible. The work can be digested in a few moments by the harried traveler, yet offers a visual enticement to longer viewing. Through its depiction of architectural ornament of the Wilmington-Philadelphia area, it has documented significant examples, some of which are now destroyed. Architecturally, *Homage to Frank Furness* does not decorate its site: It is the site. The tiles were fabricated by Brimstone Tile Works of Boulder, Colorado, and painted by Kozloff.

Kozloff's two ceramic tile and glass mosaic murals in Philadelphia's One Penn Plaza are equally successful, but for somewhat different reasons. A 1929 Art Deco building, One Penn Plaza was restored and remodeled into a handsome downtown office building. Kozloff's murals are sited on either side of a wide entrance lobby that also serves as the gateway to Conrail's Suburban Station. Unlike the Wilmington train station, Kozloff's Philadelphia commission does not create a total environmental effect. Rather, it complements and enlivens what already exists. Here, the two murals face one another across a stretch of marble floor and are thematically unrelated, except in their acknowledgement of the city's cultural heritage. Yet they are not simply decorative; they anchor the high-ceilinged space and provide a symbolic sense of entry.

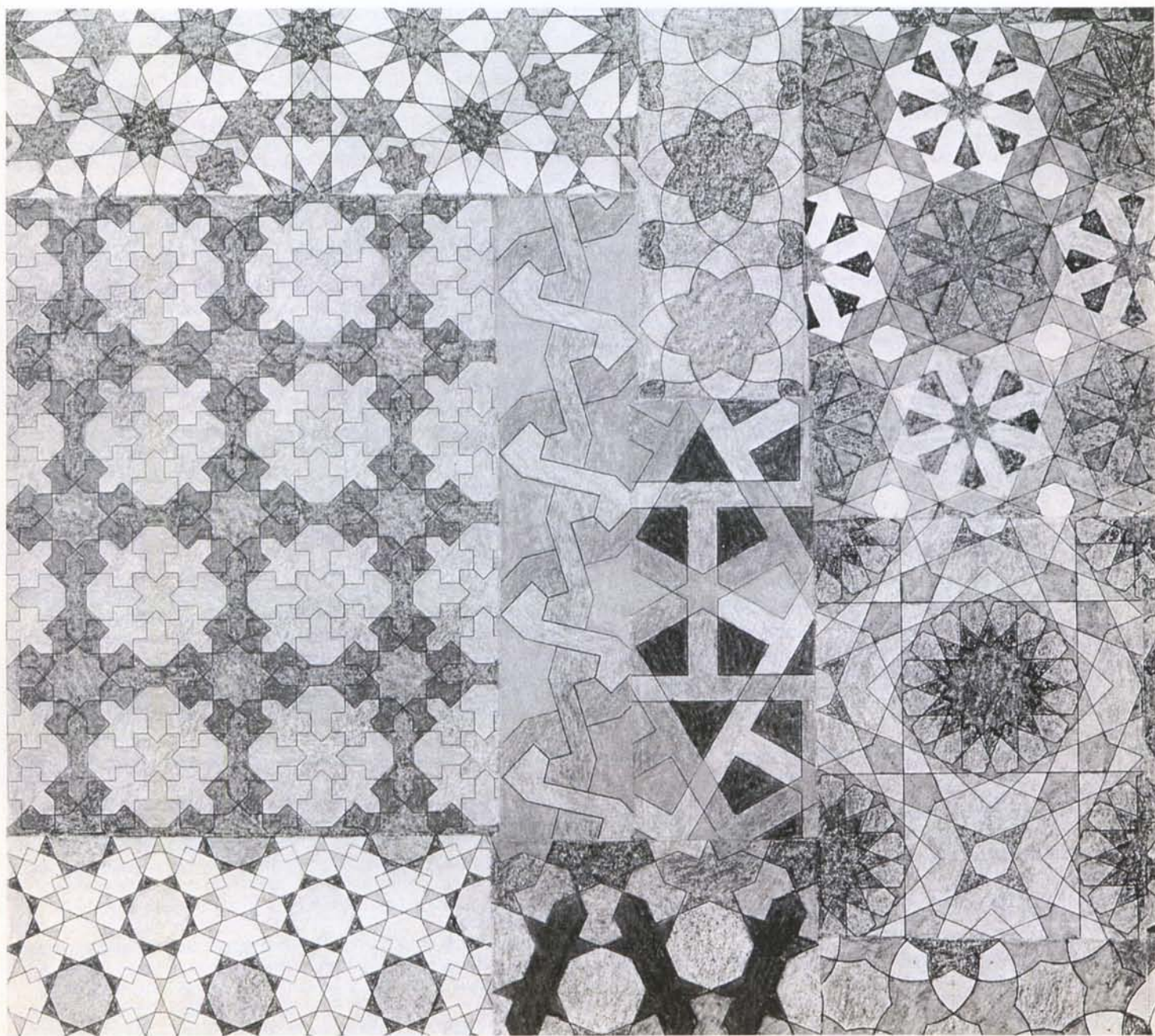
On one wall in *Galla Placidia in Philadelphia*, Kozloff has placed William Penn in an opulent architectural environment reminiscent of the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna. Holding the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's charter in his outstretched hands, the profile image of Penn echoes that of his statue crowning City Hall. Penn also functions as a stand-in for the Christian saints at Galla Placidia, surrounded by ornate decorative motifs. Here, Kozloff plays with our perceptions of Eastern and Western cultures, as well as our literal sense of space: Penn appears to be standing in a deeply recessed lunette that is, in fact, a convex wall.

On the opposite wall, honoring Philadelphia's heritage as a mercantile and transportation center, is the *Topkapi Pullman* mural. Here Kozloff employs an image of an Art Deco train based on Fix-Masseau's famous 1929 poster of the Orient Express. Yet, in another jump in time and scale, the train image is framed by the same geometric and floral motifs that embellish Istanbul's Topkapi Palace.

As public art, Kozloff's two murals are aptly suited to the opulent One Penn Plaza Building. Their reflective glass mosaic surfaces hold their own beside the marble floors, ornate bronze fixtures, and decorative chandeliers. Visually captivating, the iconography effectively combines Eastern exoticism with local historical events,



Page 2 from the book *If I Were an Astronomer* (1977), 15" x 11", colored pencils, collage, felt-tipped pens on paper.  
Photo: eeva-inkeri.





making the murals magical yet realistic.

Unlike Kozloff's previous works, the Philadelphia murals rely as much on representational imagery as on decorative patterning, even though the Pullman and Penn images have themselves been stylized into decorative motifs. The murals are also visually accessible; they can be read from a distance or examined from just a few feet away. Spoiling the potential of the site, however, is the remodeling architect's addition of a dropped archway that obscures the upper portion of both murals. This postmodern affectation seems without purpose and detracts from the architectural integrity of the building.

Commissioned in early 1985, the Philadelphia murals were installed in the fall of that year. The glass mosaic was fabricated under Kozloff's supervision by Crovatto Mosaics of Spilimbergo, Italy, and installed by their Yonkers office. The building was restored and remodeled by Stephen Lebowitz of Francis, Cauffman, Wilkinson and Pepper.

Kozloff's most recent project is one of fifteen public art commissions installed in stations along Detroit's new elevated train, the People Mover. Titled "*D*" for *Detroit*, the mural covers 1,200 square feet in a difficult two-story space. As in her previous projects, Kozloff has synthesized decorative elements derived from local architecture and history with decorative motifs drawn from a variety of Western and non-Western sources. The Detroit project is proof of her continuing interest in "those places and times where East and West overlapped to form hybrids."

The site itself, a huge wall rising some eighty feet from street level, spans the length of a steep escalator. Its irregular shape immediately suggested to Kozloff the letter "D." Because the façade of the station is glass, she wanted an image that could be read from the street but would still incorporate enough details to be visually compelling when seen from the escalator. With her interest in displacement and scale shifts, Kozloff decided to make a "monumental miniature" in the tradition of illuminated manuscripts, using the letter "D" as the central, organizing motif. Located in Detroit's Financial Station, "*D*" for *Detroit* is composed of bears and bulls organized head to tail around the open configuration of the letter. The several peacocks positioned at one side of the mural and up above in a small, separate mural are an homage to James McNeil Whistler, whose Peacock Room was originally in the Freer home in Detroit. In its current location in the Smithsonian, it has been a source of inspiration to Kozloff and other Pattern and Decoration artists. The animals also refer to astrological charts and medieval bestiaries. Indirectly, the whole piece refers to Diego Rivera's murals in the Detroit Institute of Arts.

In a departure from the colors of her previous commissions, the palette of "*D*" for *Detroit* is much lighter in tone, almost pastel. The porcelain tiles were manufactured by the Kohler Company in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and handpainted in an overglaze process

similar to majolica. The vitreous clay body manufactured by Kohler satisfied a structural requirement that the public art work be able to withstand the changing temperature of the open station.

As a public art work, Kozloff's Detroit piece enlivens and is effectively integrated into its site. Its iconography of bears, bulls, and peacocks could not be more engaging or appropriate for both the site and the city. Flowing effortlessly from floor to ceiling, edge to edge, the images and decorative patterning capture the pedestrian's gaze, never appearing as an afterthought. Like the Wilmington commission, this work creates an atmosphere into which one can enter.

If there is a problem with the work as public art, it is its site. Mounted only a few feet in from an exterior glass wall, it is impossible to see the image in its entirety. When seen from across the street, the optimum viewing distance, the mural is partially obstructed by a huge horizontal support beam. This unfortunate siting problem, however, does not diminish the aesthetic integrity of the piece, only its visual accessibility as a work of public art. It is Joyce Kozloff's contextual approach to site that is the true success of her work. Like many contemporary artists, she is determined to bring art back into the public realm, where it is a part of ongoing, daily activities. It is what artist Nancy Holt calls "putting the function back into art." To do so is no small task, for the general public has become accustomed to not understanding "modern" art. Kozloff, like Armajani, Burton, Miss, and many others, is determined to address social questions as well as aesthetic issues. There is a need for art to speak about more than other works of art.

Kozloff's stylistically decorative approach to art makes her work visually accessible. And it is the ceramic tile and glass mosaic media that allow her to effectively revive long-lost images, to breathe new life into tired symbols and to tell forgotten stories. But it is her underlying cultural research, which manifests itself in the form of image and pattern, that is the silver lining of her commissions. For, even if some of them are less compelling due to site or design, all speak of the communities in which they are found. We view Kozloff's art within the context of a public space; each commission views the cultural heritage of its site through the lens of art.

*Mason Riddle is a free-lance critic and curator of Visual and Performing Art, Intermedia Arts, Minneapolis.*

*Joyce Kozloff is represented by Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.*