

Mural decorates midtown Sacramento utility box

Bee correspondent

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Call this a "transformative" piece of public art.

An eye-catching mural has just gone up in midtown Sacramento on a most unusual canvas: a formerly drab transformer box owned by the Sacramento Metropolitan Utility District.

"It's whimsical, fun and lighthearted," said Sacramento developer Michael Heller, whose MARRS retail complex on 20th street – between J and K streets – is served by the 6-by-6-foot box now covered by the colorful painting called "Mixed Emotions." The piece depicts nine cartoonish faces.

It was Heller who came up with the idea for the art project more than two years ago. He had noticed the original artwork on newspaper boxes owned by the Sacramento News & Review and was inspired.

"My eyes went right to the SMUD transformer box," he recalled.

Heller contacted SMUD and then the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission, which conducted a design competition and ultimately selected local artist Gale Hart to do the job for a \$2,500 fee, paid by SMUD.

Hart describes the work as "fun and nostalgic" and a departure from the "dark and edgy" work she typically creates.

Now, Heller is hoping the idea catches on and this pilot project becomes a model for artistic transformations of hundreds of additional utility boxes throughout the region.

"Hopefully it leads to beautifying all of them," said Heller, who has made the MARRS complex a showpiece for innovative design features, including the 20-foot-long neon "Arts" sign on the building's back side.

If that happens, Sacramento will be joining numerous cities – among them, Emeryville in the Bay Area and Fort Collins, Colo. – that have developed large-scale programs to turn high-voltage utility boxes into dramatic conversation pieces.

Shelly Willis, interim director of the arts commission, said such works have the potential to bring new identities to neighborhoods and serve as mileposts.

She said she imagines people someday giving directions to friends, saying "turn left at the goofy utility box."

Ultimately, these and other sorts of public art have the potential to become destinations of their own, she said, drawing people to new areas just to sample the art.

Like Heller, Willis said she's hopeful that the MARRS project will inspire other box-painting projects, and said that by next year "we'll at least have a plan to address an entire neighborhood, like downtown" with multiple projects.

Arthur Starkovich, SMUD's head of government relations, is a little more cautious, noting that there's no money available right now to do these sorts of projects on a large scale.

But, he said, "if we can find a funding source and support, I'd be (happy) to move this forward."

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