

Paper Mache for 5-29-26 by David Read

One of my favorite aspects of working at Yuba Sutter Arts & Culture is facilitating the creation of public art. We've done a lot of murals including the utility box murals on street corners and even sculptures in the form of the Cotton Rosser bronze statue. Upcoming projects include painting our first street mural during Summer Stroll and Neon Alley Revival. Public art has always occupied a special place in civic life. It exists outside the walls of museums, meeting people where they live, commute, gather, protest, and celebrate. It can inspire awe and sometimes controversy. Public art belongs, in some sense, to everyone and because of that, it often becomes a reflection of our collective values, priorities, and conflicts. Over the decades, cities around the world have increasingly embraced public art not simply as decoration, but as placemaking. I sincerely believe that is what's happening here in Yuba-Sutter. Murals transform forgotten alleys into destinations. Sculptures become landmarks. In many communities, public art has become intertwined with tourism, economic development, cultural identity, and even environmental activism.

I learned recently about a fascinating and unique example, not on city streets or walls, but beneath Biscayne Bay in Miami. Known as "Reefline," the ambitious project combines underwater sculpture, marine science, and coral restoration into what may be one of the most innovative public art initiatives ever attempted. Conceived by cultural organizer Ximena Caminos, the project stretches the traditional definition of public art by asking whether art can do more than merely beautify a place. Can it actively heal an ecosystem?

Phase 1, "Concrete Coral" by artist Leandro Erlich, involved the placement of life-sized concrete automobiles on the ocean floor near Miami Beach. These submerged sculptures are not simply visual curiosities for divers and snorkelers. They were intentionally designed using marine-safe materials that encourage coral growth and create habitat for fish and other marine life. It is hoped the installations can assist reef regeneration and raise awareness about environmental issues. The installation blurs the lines between sculpture, environmental science, and activism. It also demonstrates how modern public art increasingly seeks participation rather than observation. Visitors don't merely stand before the artwork. They swim through it. They experience it physically and environmentally.

Public art can also reveal how fragile cultural memory really is. That reality recently played out in dramatic fashion when renowned marine artist Robert Wyland's massive "Whaling Wall" mural in downtown Dallas was painted over as part of preparations for a 2026 FIFA World Cup promotional mural. "Whaling Wall," which had towered above the city for nearly three decades, depicted whales and dolphins in Wyland's signature environmental style and had become a recognizable part of the urban landscape. The decision triggered immediate backlash. Residents expressed shock at seeing a beloved landmark disappear beneath layers of blue paint.

The controversy raises important questions. Who truly owns public art once it becomes woven into the identity of a city? Is a mural temporary by nature destined eventually to disappear beneath new layers of paint and new civic priorities? Or does long-standing public artwork acquire a kind of communal permanence regardless of property ownership? Public art has always lived in tension between permanence and impermanence. Murals fade. Sculptures weather. Neighborhoods evolve. But perhaps that is part of what makes public art so powerful. It is alive within the changing life of a community. Unlike museum pieces protected behind glass, public art faces the same forces cities do: politics, economics, development, climate, and time itself. Whether submerged beneath the Atlantic Ocean or disappeared beneath fresh paint on a downtown wall, public art continues to shape how communities see themselves. At its best, it reminds us that art is not merely something to observe. It is something we inhabit together.