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Fine Art Commissioned for ISI's Caring Center for Children and Parents. Part 2. Colorful Murals by Guillermo Wagner Granizo and Lark Lucas Capture the Wonder of Childhood

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When the ISI® Caring Center for Children and Parents first opened four years ago,¹ we were concerned not only with providing a cheerful, stimulating environment for our children, but also with making the center a bright and colorful addition to the surrounding community. We felt that both goals could be met by installing large-scale artwork that would be visible to the Caring Center staff and children as well as to the general public.²

In this essay I'll discuss four outdoor ceramic-tile murals created for the Caring Center playground—two each by Guillermo ("Bill") Wagner Granizo, of Benicia, California, and by Lark Lucas, of nearby Ben Lomond (see the color insert in this issue). Installed in November 1984, each mural measures 7' × 13' (213 cm × 396 cm). Readers may recall that the works of Granizo and Lucas are already well represented in our main building. It was Bill who created "Cathedral of Man," a magnificent mural installed in the third-floor stairwell and one of the first works to be commissioned by ISI.³ I recently described the additions he made to the original piece.⁴ I have also written about Lucas's ceramic-tile portraits of Huichol Indian children, on display in my office,⁵ and another major work, "Woman of the Earth."⁶

"Tall Things"

While in the Philadelphia area recently to exhibit his work, Bill stopped by ISI to chat and spoke about his two murals for the playground. Each reflects some facet of his childhood fascinations, fears, and fantasies. "Tall Things" (see

the insert) was born of the awe that high or tall things inspired in him. Drawn from his own experiences as a boy in Latin America, it nevertheless commemorates the discoveries—some illuminating, others disappointing—that all children make as they grow up.⁷

The giraffe in the foreground represents one such discovery, when the 11-year-old Granizo saw his first giraffe at the circus in 1934. The animal's true height came as a shock: Granizo had always thought that elephants were the tallest animals. However, Granizo's younger brother insisted that camels were taller than giraffes or elephants. In tribute to his sibling, Granizo not only added a camel to the mural (behind the giraffe), but also drew a little boy on top of it; the boy is satisfied, Granizo said with a smile, that from there he can see over the giraffe's head.⁷ The aircraft flying through the center of the mural (playfully labeled "EG—ISI") expresses the sense of wonder Granizo felt the first time he watched a plane take off from a Guatemalan airstrip.

Some of the objects depicted in Granizo's mural, such as trees, utility poles, sunflowers, and hot-air balloons, would make just about anyone's list of things that are high or tall. But Granizo's reasons for including other images, such as the fish in the foreground and the houses in the background, benefit from further explanation. The houses recall Granizo's boyhood experience of watching his father, a ham radio enthusiast, climb up to a dizzying height (the roof of their home) to install an antenna. The fish swimming placidly in the foreground

are actually the "highest" animals in the painting, since they represent the fish that Granizo's father loved to describe to young Bill: those that inhabit Lake Titicaca, the world's highest freshwater body, located in the Andes Mountains on the border between Bolivia and Peru.

"Carousel"

The circus that formed part of the inspiration for "Tall Things" also influenced Granizo in the creation of "Carousel." The circus sideshow, with its colorful posters, serves as the setting. Though a seemingly secondary part of the mural, the posters are important to Granizo. He liked the sideshow more than the circus itself, and for him the posters embodied the show's carnival atmosphere. They were also among the first objects to stir his interest in art.⁷

The first carousel he ever rode had a broken generator, which forced the carnival operators to pay older children to turn the carousel by hand. Granizo recalls that he enjoyed the experience tremendously.⁷ Nevertheless, the carousel in his mural is turned, in conventional fashion, by a motor. Granizo indicates the carousel's movement by showing one child, on the right, approaching the viewer and another, on the left, retreating. The other children, traveling laterally across the viewer's field of vision, are drawn in profile.

The mural depicts the carnival at night, when an amusement park is transformed into something magical. A big, red, harvest moon presides over a scene illuminated by twinkling lights outlining the roller coaster and Ferris wheel, while spotlights bathe the midway and its carousel. Granizo emphasized the nighttime atmosphere by giving the children in the foreground dark complexions, indicating that they are beyond the reach of the lights on the midway. The children gain progressively more color in their faces as the midway is approached, until, on the midway itself, their complexions are washed out by the force of the limelight. Beyond the sideshow billboards, the children's faces are muted once again, lost in the darkness of the background.⁷

Granizo tends to use heavy black outlines and bright, cheerful colors and arranges the motifs in his tile paintings in triangular, circular, and rectangular patterns. Eduardo Carillo, professor of art, University of California, Santa Cruz, points out that this style, which Carillo terms "geometric abstraction," allows Granizo to pack his murals with information because it flattens the picture space and allows him to change perspective as needed.⁸

"The Children's Art Yard"

Whereas Granizo's murals are based on his attempt to reach back into childhood and portray events and emotions as they seemed to him when he was young, Lucas's murals are based more upon adult perceptions of childhood and children's activities. And while Granizo's stylized scenes usually incorporate various perspectives within a single work, Lucas's murals include highly realistic vignettes, each based on a single perspective. The juxtaposition of such contrasting styles might have resulted in works that compete with one another for attention. But Granizo designed the borders of each mural to help unify the group.

Both of Lucas's murals reflect her involvement with community art projects in her hometown of Salt Lake City, Utah. In the first, "The Children's Art Yard," she portrays an "art playground" for children—one of the many projects sponsored by the Artists in the City program in which she participated. The playground is part of the city's arts festival, an event in which local artists and craftspersons display their work from sidewalk booths set up for the occasion. More than a diversion for kids whose parents were worn out, the art playground was meant to help children express themselves artistically and increase their awareness of art in their everyday environment. The mural depicts scenes based on Lucas's experience as a teacher in the playground program. The children were helped to paint murals, to build with blocks or to use hammers and nails, and to costume themselves in "dress-up" clothes, such as adults' hats

and shoes. Thousands of children and adults have participated over the years.⁹

The mural shows the various activities that go on simultaneously in the Children's Art Yard. At the top left of the mural, one little girl works on a painting while another tries on a dress several sizes too large for her. Beside them is an older child hard at work on a sculpture composed of string, wood, boxes, and paper. Next is a young girl eating cotton candy; beside her is a toddler, surveying the bustling scene. Other vignettes show an adult helping a child with a sculpture and two children sifting through a pile of odds and ends. In the center, children get their faces painted to resemble clowns, while below, yet more children get involved in making art.

"The Arts Festival: A Celebration of Life"

The arts festival, of which the Children's Art Yard was a part, was sponsored by the Utah Arts Council, based in Salt Lake City. In a sense, Lucas's participation in helping to plan the mammoth undertaking repaid a childhood debt, for it was a Lucas family tradition to attend the arts festival. There, young Lark and her family would wander slowly through the crowded exhibits, enjoying the crafts demonstrations, musical performances, and the work of the artisans. As an adult, Lucas joined in organizing the events and exhibits that would provide similar enjoyment for other families—and perhaps other budding young artists.⁹

The mural is full of scenes and activities that are part of many such festivals in the US. At the upper left, festival-goers peruse the offerings of a stained-glass artist; next to them, children paint scenery (and each other!) in the Art Yard. A mime performs for a small audience left of center, and at the far left a folksinger takes the stage. Other festival-goers, including one in a wheelchair, examine paintings in the lower lefthand corner; the artist relaxes in a canvas chair nearby. Another visitor, lower right, purchases a piece of pottery, while a youngster in a stroller points at some-

thing of interest. At the far lower right, a vendor sells cups of flavored ice, called snow cones. Such scenes are repeated, of course, at arts festivals throughout the US. Although these festivals have been going on for years, no one can say that they will remain the same forever. Thus, Lucas's mural is not only an enjoyable work of art but also preserves a slice of life in the US.

Conclusion

In creating these four murals, both Granizo and Lucas have provided not only decorative additions to the Caring Center playground, but also art with which the children can interact and from which they can learn. Of course, children of varying ages relate to art in different ways: younger children might pick out a familiar shape or object and want to touch and explore the work; older children are capable of thinking or talking about a work and relating familiar scenes or activities pictured in it to their own experiences.

In speculating on the ways in which the children at the Caring Center might interact with the murals, Granizo felt that they might first react to the colors. "But they could catch a thing or two here and there that relates to them in a more personal way. And then their reactions could be very, very different from what I would expect. We don't really know exactly how the children will respond; we just think that they will relate to the activities of the children in the murals."⁷

The insert shows how the murals are placed in the context of the Caring Center playground. Originally, we had intended to install the murals across from the Caring Center on the rear of the ISI building. This would provide the staff and children with a stimulating view instead of just the windows and the brick exterior. But the hollow-core brick construction of the ISI headquarters,¹⁰ which had been completed in 1979, could not accommodate the added weight of the tile murals without extensive modifications.

Architect Jack Thrower, a partner in Bower, Lewis & Thrower, the firm that designed the Caring Center, feels that

this installation problem was "a fortuitous 'bad break,'"11 since because of it, we decided to mount the murals instead on the perimeter of the playground. There they form an integral part of the children's play environment. They also can be viewed by ISI employees from their offices; several groups, including the *Current Contents*[®] staff, enjoy this benefit. And when I come to work each morning and leave at the end of the day, I get an excellent view of the playground's "outdoor art gallery" from ISI's main stairwell.

Our goal was to make art a natural part of the children's lives, and as the scenes in the insert show, the murals are as much a part of the playground as the swings and the sandbox. Moreover, says Thrower, "in this eye-level position, the children can not only see them from afar, but can also examine them from close range—really the only way to fully appreciate the richly detailed and intricately interlocked episodes within each mural panel.... This placement also invites exploration with the hands as well as with the eye.... From a purely architectural point of view, the murals are indeed a happy addition to the play yard. The Caring Center building...was conceived as a rather neutral backdrop for activity. The bright colors and rich patterns of the murals are complementary to the building's simple surface and add a sense of activity to the play yard, even when the children are inside."¹¹

As I said earlier, the visual appearance of the Caring Center's exterior and the contribution it makes to the community environment were among our primary concerns when the building was designed. So successful has been the integration of art and architecture that the outdoor art has become synonymous with the Caring Center—not only for many of the children and parents who use the center, but also for many community residents as well. To further enhance the art's contribution to the community, we installed floodlamps in front of the murals, so that their festive colors can continue to brighten the neighborhood even after most employees have gone home and the Caring Center is closed.

The works of art at the Caring Center provide children with important artistic and intellectual stimulation. They also add a decorative, festive element to the center and the surrounding neighborhood. The murals are both a commemoration to and an ideal of childhood—symbols of ISI's commitment to making a special time of life even better.

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