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Public art project sparks compassion



Richard Renaldi/ArtWorks

New York photographer Richard Renaldi focused his project on taking portraits of two strangers posing together as if they knew each other. The result captures the poignancy of our missed connections with those we pass everyday. The photos are on display on Metro bus shelters throughout the city.

The results were 20 moving photographs of Cincinnati strangers from Renaldi and eight from the local team that were displayed in this year's biannual FotoFocus lens-based art exhibition, and are now displayed on transit cards, a vinyl bus wrap, and in countless bus shelters in the city.

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Cincinnati Metro recently partnered with ArtWorks, a local nonprofit organization, to remind Cincinnatians to take a moment and acknowledge, maybe even get to know, the strangers they pass on the street every day, hoping it may lead to a stronger and more enriched community.

ArtWorks serves Cincinnati by empowering local youth to transform the community through public art and other projects, like its recent collaboration with acclaimed New York photographer Richard Renaldi on an extension of his internationally recognized "Touching Strangers" project.

In "Touching Strangers," Renaldi asks complete and diverse strangers to pose with each other intimately in front of a camera, resulting in powerful photographs that remind us that we are all part of a greater community.

Renaldi traveled to Cincinnati and devoted two weeks of summer to work with two talented local professionals and four local high school ArtWorks apprentices, who interviewed alongside 300 other students.

"ArtWorks places a priority on the diversity of project teams," said David Heyburn, public art manager at ArtWorks. "So the students were of different genders, races, ages, socioeconomic background and levels of previous skill."



"It was an interesting thing to realize that Richard was basically done with this project," Heyburn said. "He started it in 2006, but it was getting a lot of press and he got a lot of requests to do projects with different people.

"He turned them down because they weren't getting the intent of the project, but he accepted the project with ArtWorks. The project took a new life for him with our unique iteration."

For Cincinnati Metro Public Affairs Manager Jill Dunne, it seems only appropriate that the "Touching Strangers" photographs should be displayed in bus shelters. "Public transit brings people together who might have never met otherwise," Dunne said.

Dunne's favorite photograph was one that Renaldi took from the back of two people on a bus. "It is a really neat photo. You can tell they were comfortable with each other even though they were complete strangers," Dunne said.



Cincinnati Metro has worked with ArtWorks before, and they have gotten lots of positive feedback from the community for the large, striking photographs that are beautifying shelter spaces, and hopes to work with them on more projects in the future. "Infusing art into public spaces in meaningful ways can create emotional connectivity to that place," Heyburn said.

Heyburn also pointed out that he hopes the work that ArtWorks does helps make the citizens of Cincinnati feel more attached to their community, and that the "Touching Strangers" project sparks a sense of compassion for people.

"[This project] created curiosity and intrigue in spaces that would previously otherwise have just been passed by," said Heyburn. "Hopefully it builds a sense of potential in the community that although we may be strangers, we have the ability to embrace and love each other."