



Dana Donaty's Positive Power Pop

By Sandra Schulman
Photo: Pedro Penlaver, WPB Magazine

As one of the new works in “**The Commons: 15 Artists, 15 Spaces**” project, Dana Donaty’s bright, powerful multi-media work is as positive as it gets. The mural sits on the prime park location along Flagler Drive.

The City of West Palm Beach Art in Public Places (AiPP) program commissioned 15 professional, Palm Beach County artists for the project that spreads out around town, bringing work to the local creative community, providing monetary relief during these challenging times, and as a way to introduce a new wave of public art in West Palm Beach. To apply Donaty had to make a work that would be durable and strong. She also had to film a 3-minute video of herself explaining why she is an artist who should be selected for this project.

Donaty was raised in New Jersey. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drawing from Moore College of Art & Design in Philadelphia, PA. After living twelve years in London, England, she relocated in 2006 to South Florida. Her multi-media work incorporates painting, sculpture, and assemblage in exploring cultural identity.

The work she submitted, YES, was already constructed as a sculpture at her home studio, using dark green faux topiary grass cut out into letters and then affixed separately to pink painted panels and then to a 10 x 10 cement wall that runs along her home studio.

YES artwork is a theme Donaty has been using for a long time in her paintings and sculpture. Going through some life challenges, changing studio locations, adopting a puppy that needed socialization training, she initially built the large new work for herself during the pandemic so when she sat down at her home office or her living room, it encouraged her to be positive as she looked at it through the windows onto her garden.

So the work had to be changed to be installed in the park.

“It was a choice to make it different by looking at the park. There was a way it needed to be constructed,” Donaty says



Art Dana Donaty in her studio. Her new YES artwork is part of The Commons: 15 Artists, 15 Spaces series and is now installed on Flagler Drive in downtown West Palm Beach.

in her home studio that has ample space for a large studio, a garage for wood-working, a storage room, and separate office. "It was site specific. It had to work and it was important to use topiary, but the way it was done in my studio wasn't going to work on that site. The use of the greenery was to make it look like it needs to be nurtured, like it's growing."

To adapt to the outdoor public space Donaty felt it needed to be a photo of the work affixed to separate free-standing walls. This adds another layer to it.

"I went to great trouble to photograph it with the right shadows," recalls Donaty. "It had blind spots and was more trouble than I thought, but I needed to try

something that I hadn't done before. I created maquettes once I got accepted. The art had to adapt to the site, with panels, photos, the scale issue, a direct photo of the art becoming a new kind of art. It needed to be organic. I could not have gotten this same effect on a computer-generated image. So, a lot of back and forth with color and shadows, adding the pink, and the work needs to be durable enough to be there 3 years or more."

The application process needed a video of why she should be considered, not the art but why she should be considered. It's a big question!

"I had so many technical difficulties with

just that," says Donaty. "But my response was that I am an experienced local artist, this is interesting, and it makes me evolve in my artistic practice. All that in 3 minutes exactly! YES is in my work in paintings a lot so, this is a progression."

Donaty was primarily a painter, creating colorful, distinctive characters that were hybrids of people and animals. These sprawling interactive critters eventually started climbing out of the frame, becoming sculptures that worked their way out of the frames into virtual reality space.

Her exhibits became installations, with creatures and balloons and decorated balls swinging around free in space. A

Donaty looks out into her garden at the original topiary sculptures that make up her newest public art work YES.



current series reflects that in a kind of boxed diorama with classic landscape painted backgrounds against the creatures that make their way out of the box. Faux fur and bones and grass and blue colored hair extensions mingle with woodland animals, some even hidden around the back that crawled out of the box.

She collects stick and moss and tree fungus and discarded tires for the dolly bear hybrids to play on. The dolly bear is a very sophisticated girl, with multiple computer 3D renderings of her face, body, and clothing made to get her just right, like a natural history museum display on acid. Donaty herself makes a daily statement with a wild collection of footwear – from a coveted pair of rare and pricey Star Wars themed heels to stilettos made of pandas, colored balls, various metallics, and iridescent leathers. She has an enormous custom made shoe closet and Instagrams her shoes frequently. She likes to be out in the world as much as she enjoys being in the studio. Even hearing negative or confusing feedback – like the person who said her painting was “disturbing” – does not change her path because “I feel at home in this work,” she says.

The wildly colored and densely populated art of painter and sculptor Dana Donaty arrives fully formed out of a most unusual process. A child of Depression era parents – a doctor father and an artist mother – she was taught and told to never waste anything. Taking that extreme lesson to heart, she splatters the leftover water from one painting onto a canvas to make another. After the layers and splotches of color begin to build up, she uses a process called Pareidolia– a psychological phenomenon involving a stimulus (an image or a sound) wherein the mind perceives a familiar pattern of something where none actually exists. She sees these little creatures and then just start teasing them out.

By the time Dana Donaty is done teasing them out, there are full blown rhinos, Ewoks, Bart Simpson, cats, dogs, ballerina legs, cowboys, kangaroos and cartoon characters from the 60s such as Spy Vs. Spy.



Donaty points out some of the collected elements - natural and man made - she uses in her sculptures.

Another unusual part of her process is her choice of what she listens to while she paints. Most painters choose jazz or rock or something with a beat – or off beat – to work by. Donaty listens to audio books.

“I love audio books!” She exclaims. “My favorites are biographies, stories on artists and how the mind works. You don’t have control on how information comes to you, things are not in sequence, but listening to books I can at least follow a narrative thread.”

Coming up Donaty will have work at a Palm Beach Cultural Council exhibit and has a project underway with F.A.O. Schwartz in New York. A 12-year old 80-foot mural of hers in Delray has been removed from a building, so she is looking to restore and move it.

“The pandemic has slowed me down in some ways but since I work at home it’s been in a way I wanted,” she says as her adorable newly adopted puppy Cash scrambles around at her feet. “I prefer to be here, projects flow through the house.”

Editor’s note: To learn more about the artist and her work and upcoming exhibits, visit danadonatyfineart.com