



DATE: June 27, 2024

TO: Public Art Committee

FROM: Melissa Abercrombie, Public Art Specialist

SUBJECT: Recommendation to the City of Petaluma Public Art Committee to Receive a Staff Presentation and Conduct a Study Session to Solicit Input and Provide Nonbinding Comments in Consideration of Modifications to the Approved Mary Fuller McChesney Estate Artwork Acquisition

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Petaluma Public Art Committee receive a staff presentation and conduct a study session to solicit input and provide nonbinding comments in consideration of modifications to the approved Mary Fuller McChesney Estate artwork acquisition. Specifically, the Committee will be asked to advise the City on the exchange of two artworks acquired by the City of Petaluma from the Mary Fuller McChesney Estate, which have condition issues that will prevent the pieces from being able to be displayed publicly without conservation measures.

BACKGROUND

Sculptor, author, and art historian Mary Fuller McChesney, who lived and worked in the Petaluma area for several decades, passed away on May 4, 2022, in Petaluma. McChesney's legacy as a renowned, local, female artist of the mid-century continues in her sculptures included as part of her estate. McChesney's friends, neighbors, and estate managers describe the artist's wishes for her works to be displayed for public enjoyment. The Public Art program took the opportunity to preserve the legacy of this local, influential artist by collecting 14 works with the intention to display McChesney's works for residents of and visitors to Petaluma. McChesney's artwork will educate about a unique and prominent voice in Petaluma's creative community and history, in addition to honoring McChesney's wishes.

Born Mary Fuller in 1922 in Wichita, Kansas, McChesney grew up in Stockton, California on her family's farm and moved to the Bay Area to study philosophy at UC Berkeley. McChesney became a self-taught artist and worked as a welder during World War II at the Richmond Shipyard. In 1949, Mary Fuller married a fellow artist, printmaker, and teacher Robert McChesney. From the radical political pressures of the 1950s anti-communist movement,

McChesney and her husband faced increasing pressures from society and work that eventually pushed the artists to move abroad to an artist colony in Ajijic, Mexico, where they lived for the next few years. During her time in Mexico, McChesney discovered Mayan and Aztec mythology that became the theme of her work, which until then was primarily influenced by modern abstract works. McChesney moved back to the Bay Area with her husband in 1952, settling on Sonoma Mountain, where they would live for the next several decades. McChesney developed a unique medium for her sculptures; a mixture of concrete and vermiculite that would be sculpted before drying, forcing McChesney to work quickly. Many of McChesney's works were not displayed beyond her home on Sonoma Mountain because of their size, scale, and weight.

At the October 2022 regular PPAC meeting, staff informed the Committee about opportunities to view available artworks in the McChesney estate, The PPAC instructed staff to create a visual catalog of the McChesney works to begin discussion and selection of specific individual artworks that may be better suited and more desirable to collect for the Public Art Program. Between October and December of 2022, staff and an ad hoc subcommittee of the PPAC completed site visits to the McChesney residence on Sonoma Mountain, the Astro Motel exhibition, and the Sinella and Calabi residences to view available works in the McChesney estate for potential acquisition.

At the January 26, 2023, PPAC meeting, staff presented the results from the Committee's ranking of 92 artworks included in estate exhibitions at the Astro Motel in Santa Rosa, CA, the artist's former residence on Sonoma Mountain, and the Sinella and Calabi residences in Sebastopol, CA. Staff provided a suggested locations list for future public artwork installations and opportunities for the Committee's consideration at the February 23, 2022, PPAC meeting. The locations list was generated for the PPAC to use in consideration of several different active and upcoming projects, including possible sites for the Mary Fuller McChesney acquisition.

Dennis Calabi presented at the March 23, 2023 meeting to provide input on the acquisition process selection to aid in the Committee's discussion and ultimate decision. Ultimately, the PPAC selected 14 sculptures for purchase, which received City Council approval on June 11, 2023.

In August 2023, Staff began conversations with conservator Spring Maxfield to consult on the conservation, transportation, and installation of the 14 purchased artworks. Spring Maxfield was instrumental in curating, transporting, conserving, and installing the collection of Mary Fuller McChesney sculptures currently on exhibition at the Astro Motel. Her familiarity and experience with the collection offer unique insight into how best to preserve it.

On April 2, 2024, the Subcommittee and staff members met with Spring Maxfield at the Astro motel to pursue a bid to pack and transport artworks purchased by the City to storage pending funding or partnerships for installation. At that time, Spring provided her professional opinion that the "Owl Bench" (Vermiculite and wood) and the "Woman with Owl" (Vermiculite) were in fair condition. The Subcommittee and staff discussed condition concerns, and the Staff consulted with Dennis Calabi. He understood the concerns and confirmed he is open to an exchange of the pieces for other works of equal value from the McChesney Collection.

DISCUSSION

The deteriorated condition of the “Owl Bench” and the instability of the “Woman with Owl” sculpture are incompatible with the identified goal of the original Mary Fuller McChesney acquisition “To be low maintenance and appropriate for public space.” Condition findings discovered at the April 2, 2024, visit to the Astro Motel informed the Subcommittee and staff of the potential shortcomings of the Vermiculite construction of these two sculptures. As a result, the Subcommittee and staff began exploring an exchange.

After the June 19, 2024, visit to the Calabi Gallery and storage unit by the Subcommittee and staff, it was suggested by Dennis Calabi that the PPAC consider exchange options for the “Owl Bench” (\$4,800) and “Woman with Owl” (\$5,000) for other artworks from the McChesney Estate. He presented a variety of works created by Mary Fuller McChesney and her husband, Robert Pearson McChesney, who is also deceased (Calabigallery.com). The Subcommittee and staff considered many options and variables and decided not to explore works that were valued at over \$9,800, in poor condition, or made of materials that could not withstand display in a public setting.

Considerations of materials, cost, and restoration were a priority in creating the selections offered as exchange options:

- Consider the diversity of materials in acquisition. Of the 14 acquired selections, 11 are Vermiculite, and 3 are Bronzes.
- Diversify the artists represented in the Petaluma Public Art collection. Trading for works by Robert Pearson McChesney will allow us to include an additional Petaluma artist in our collection.
- The long-term cost of maintaining and restoring artworks. Many of Mary’s mixtures for Vermiculite were varied and imprecise, which can result in costly restoration. Materials can be very fragile. Exchanging pieces that are in fair condition for bronze artworks or printed works for interior display will be of better long-term value to the City.
- Longevity of Bronze pieces compared to Vermiculite construction. Bronze artworks will require less long-term maintenance and will respond better to outdoor conditions.
- Safety of artworks that could be unstable if climbed. “Woman with Owl” was selected with the intention of installation at the Senior Center. The instability of the piece would not be consistent with the Public Art Committee’s intended location.
- Variety of location options: Printed works could be displayed in interiors of City-owned locations.
- Printed works are less costly to transport.

CASE STUDIES

No case studies are associated with this meeting item.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The Public Art fund purchased 14 Mary Fuller McChesney artworks ranging from approximately 1 foot to 9 feet in height. City-owned properties and rights-of-way will be selected to install the various artworks, which may include, but are not limited to, existing public parks, traffic circles, and community facilities, as funds become available. The final location of individual artworks will be approved by the PPAC at a public hearing and will be subject to the approval of applicable permits (e.g., building permit, encroachment permit, etc.). Based on the above, the City has determined that the Mary Fuller McChesney Acquisition project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Sections 15301 (Existing Facilities) which includes minor alterations to existing facilities that will involve negligible or no expansion of use, 15303 (New Construction) which includes installation of new small structures, and 15311 (Accessory Structures) which includes construction or placement of minor structures which are appurtenant to existing commercial, industrial, and institutional facilities.

CITYWIDE GOALS & PRIORITIES

Public Art Master Plan (PAMP) Goals:

- Respect and embrace the City's physical and historic attributes, social characteristics and demographics, aesthetic heritage, vision, and goals for the future.
- Represent the diversity of our community.
- Encourage enjoyment and celebration of the human spirit and artistic creativity.
- Activate neighborhoods that may not have existing public art.
- Be low maintenance and appropriate for public space.
- Develop a public art program that addresses and reflects the values, cultures and aspirations of the community.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATION

No further recommendations have been made for this meeting item.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1. Staff Presentation