

South Philadelphia immigrants the focus of multifaceted art project

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Body

Samnon Mao Chan - 63, newsstand owner, Khmer Rouge survivor, Buddhist meditator, and lottery-ticket dispenser - is outside the Doggie Style pet-supply store on East Passyunk Avenue.

Arms spread for balance, a willing smile on his face, he places his feet on footprints painted on the sidewalk, choreographed by Miro Dance Theatre's Amanda Miller to echo his "backward and twisted" journey from Cambodia to **Philadelphia**.

"My history is here," Chan says as he follows the steps, tracing his initial exit from and subsequent return to Phnom Penh, then a big leap across the ocean to Washington, D.C., then to **Philadelphia**.

"This is the real experience of my life," he says, completing the dance. "I feel proud of acting such a personal history. It is really expressive. It is a very big journey."

The footprints are part of a **multifaceted** installation by the city's Mural **Arts** Program that **focuses** on **immigrant** groups in **South Philadelphia** and runs through June 11. Chan's is one of five such patterns in the 1700 block of East Passyunk, representing five individual journeys.

Organized under the collective title "Journeys **South**," it includes the steps - called "Start Here" - and three other public-**art projects** that dramatically demonstrate both the changing face of immigration to **South Philadelphia** and the expansion of Mural **Arts**' usual side-of-building work "off the wall."

"I've been a Mural **Arts** muralist for 10 years," said artist Michelle Ortiz, who created new awnings for eight Italian Market vendors with photographer Tony Rocco. "It's really pushing those boundaries of public **art**."

On Ninth Street between Washington Avenue and Christian Street, the awnings - collectively titled "Different Paths, One Market" - evoke a touching commonality, in words and images, of families leaving one home to create another. The subjects are Italian (Anthony Anastasio, Carmen Lerro, Tony and Mary Messina, Paul and Frances Giordano), Chinese-Cambodian (Judy Tran), Mexican (Lydia Mendez, Rosalio Corona), and Vietnamese (Nghia Nguyen).

Ortiz, who hopes the **art** will foster a bond among the merchants, had to persuade people to participate. Some finally were motivated by practicality - a new awning. The images are on the underside, visible as you stand on the sidewalk and decide how many peppers to buy, or whether to spring for a \$5 box of mangos.

Nghia Nguyen works right under his awning, which contains an image of him looking much more worried than the Super Bowl hat-wearing vendor who greets you in person. His face stares past an image of a flag, a dragon, a rice

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field worker. Nguyen left home at 21 on a boat from Vietnam and has raised five children, two of them University of Pennsylvania graduates.

Next to Nguyen is the awning commemorating Tony and Mary Messina, a brother and sister from Sicily. The mural incorporates a letter Tony wrote home from the Korean War that ends, "In short, I'm coming home."

"How can I put it," 82-year-old Tony said Wednesday, standing beneath the image of his younger self and his handwritten letter. "It gives us a little life."

Over at Ninth and Washington, at the landmark Paul and Frances Giordano produce stand, the faces of Wally Giordano's late grandparents painted on the awning come hauntingly into view behind hanging scales and heads of cabbage.

"People will drive by and say, 'Oh my God - Frances,' " said Wally Giordano. "People are still remembering. She was tough as nails. When I was 5, she told me, 'Get a bag, wait on somebody.' "

Ortiz said the awnings contain common visual elements - the fan in Judy Tran's awning evokes the wheel of the produce cart of Anthony Anastasio. The words in each link up to form one poem. This is a working market - the awnings get rolled up from time to time, remarked on by customers, and also ignored. The afternoon sun lights them up; rain streaks them.

Over on Passyunk, the closed Monastero Barbershop has been repurposed as a video installation accompanying the "Start Here" steps - perhaps the project's furthest divergence from a mural on a building.

Pat Monastero Ruber, daughter of the barbershop's late owner, has barely changed a thing, from the robins-egg-blue barber chairs to the bottles of Jeris Hair Tonic and Fitch Dandruff Removing Shampoo.

But now when you sit in a barber chair, you put on headphones to hear interviews with various neighborhood residents, look in the mirror, or swing your chair around to see videos created by Miro's Tobin Rothlein. Or you can just wander in and debate the merits of various immigrant waves with Ruber, who still lives behind the shop.

"For us, it's not just the video, it's this whole room and what happens here," said Rothlein.

He created videos of each subject - Nghia Nguyen meditating for 40 minutes, Ruber putting on makeup in the old barbershop, a place once off-limits to girls and women. Underneath are videos of the five people - Chan, Ruber, Verrone Romeoletti, Thoai Nguyen, and Eva Hernandez - being taught the footprint patterns.

The patterns are numbered, with beats marked, arrows, and left and right feet marked, inviting passersby to trace. Their placement along the iconic block of East Passyunk - in front of Doggie Style, A Man's Image, Blush Beauty Bar, A&P Kitchens, and Monastero's Barbershop - says as much about past and present, change and recalcitrance - as anything else about the installation.

"Journeys South" also includes a series of honor boxes that contain "Broadside Ballads" - printed, illustrated poems about immigration by poet Frank Sherlock and artist Erik Ruin - and a handcrafted, old-fashioned zoetrope, "A 7th Street Memory Box," created by photographer R.A. Friedman, which pays homage to the Eastern European Jewish neighborhood centered at Seventh and Wolf Streets.

See a video of Samnon Mao Chan re-creating the footprint pattern of his life at www.philly.com/journeys.

Information about viewing "Journeys South," including barbershop hours, is at www.muralarts.org/journeysouth.

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