

YELLOW SPRINGS NEWS

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Skeins away! Yarn-bombers strike

By Brooke Bryan



PHOTO BY BROOKE BRYAN

Local artists Corrine Bayraktaroglu and Nancy Mellon, aka the JafaGirls, stand behind a pole they have tagged with knit graffiti on Dayton Street. Their Yellow Springs public fiber art is featured in the new book, 'Yarn Bombing,' from Arsenal Pulp Press.

without getting noticed — the JafaGirls see their practice as a whimsical, playful form of public art that manifests in ever-morphing installations around town.

In fact, the JafaGirls can't walk down the sidewalk without inspecting the condition of the poles, trees and benches sporting their knit graffiti, usually with the help of passers-by. Currently the pair is focused on Dayton Street — the dark side of town, as Mellon affectionately calls it — but the JafaGirls admit that this sort of public openness can't happen everywhere.

"Yellow Springs is very different from other towns," Mellon said. "Other places take it down right after you put it up."

"Or they will threaten to fine you," Bayraktaroglu said. "A lot of people don't know about street art," she said. "There's a bad reputation for graffiti."

The practice of knit graffiti in Yellow Springs came about after Bayraktaroglu gathered information from the Internet for a Yellow Springs Arts Council presentation on graffiti arts. She came across the group "Knitta," a Texas collective.

"They were wrapping knitting around bicycle racks and sign posts," Bayraktaroglu said. Mellon and Bayraktaroglu went to work outside of what they call "the Hip Joint" — the Yellow Springs Senior Center. What began as one piece of a tree-sweater bloomed into a large collaborative project.

Last winter the Knit-Knot tree on Xenia Avenue earned worldwide news coverage for Yellow Springs. The JafaGirls credit the publicity to blogging and using the photo community called Flickr.

"Any one who does yarn bombing crawls the Web looking for images," Bayraktaroglu said. And being part of the Web knit graffiti community led the JafaGirls to be included in the Yarn Bombing book.

"The thrill for us is that it is representing Yellow Springs. It exemplifies the spirit of this village, the joy and tolerance, and sense of playfulness and acceptance," she said.

Yarn Bombing does feature whimsical art, like sweater rompers on bronze deer sculptures and fuzzy scarves for historical-political figures in Washington, D.C., but much of the art has an overt political component. In Denmark, knit graffiti artists draped an army tank in a blanket of pink crocheted squares to protest their country's involvement in the Iraq war. In Houston, a 2,000-foot long yellow scarf was laid upon an urban side-street

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FRONT PAGE

EDITORIAL

OBITUARIES

SPORTS

CLASSIFIEDS

CALENDAR

AD INFO

DIRECTORY

CONTACT

ARCHIVES

as a center line, what the organizer called a handcrafted "interruption of the everyday environment created for cars and trucks."

For Mellon, the very act of taking a simple craft like knitting — traditionally associated with domesticity and a quiet feminine spirit — to the streets is a bold gesture.

"It does say something in a feminist vein. By taking arts that really weren't acknowledged as arts over the years to the street is a way to say, 'Pay attention! This is an art,'" she said.

The JafaGirls have compiled what Bayraktaroglu calls "the bloody long list" of ideas for local public art. The list includes their current project, which involves someone named Mr. Plato — the town philosopher — whose felted self might grace local businesses soon. The question, "Where is Mr. Plato?" will foster a sort of interactive art installation out of the felted resuscitation doll.

For the JafaGirls, being an art community means that everyone you run into around town has a creative bent of some sort, Mellon said, which is a different kind of place than an arts community that is focused on gallery after gallery of visual arts.

"It's about expanding people's appreciation of art," Bayraktaroglu said.

The JafaGirls also are interested in using recycled and reclaimed things as materials for their art. Much of the Dayton Street art is reclaimed from the original Knit-Knot tree, and other pieces are knitted from recycled plastic bags.

The JafaGirls are not the only yarn bombers around, Mellon noted. Little fabric buckets that seem to beg for tiny found things have been added to some local poles, and are the work of other crafters more stealthy than they.

Some of the local yarn-bombers' work is on display at the "craft beyond tradition" art show, sponsored by the Yellow Springs Arts Council, in the arts council space at 108 Dayton Street. The show is dedicated to Tom Blake, the elder brother of villager Ellen Blake Hoover. Blake, who turns 66 this year, has disabilities such as autism, aphasia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder and lives in a group home in Sydney. He has been knitting since he was young, but until Hoover saw the Knit-Knot Tree, it was hard to imagine what to do with all the knitting he creates. Now, a tree in Hoover's Dayton Street yard sports his work, and more is on display at the show.

In addition, Olga Ziemka, winner of the recent Yellow Springs sculpture art contest, seeks public contributions of knitted blocks of color for her installation. Interested persons can contact the Yellow Springs Arts Council at 767-9263 for more information.

But Yellow Springs does have one local problem regarding Yarn Bombing. The book went to press mislabeled on the double-page photo spread — Bayraktaroglu's own photos — labeling what villagers know as Yellow Springs, Ohio, as Yellow Springs, Colorado. The JafaGirls are working towards getting proper citations for their Ohio abode. Meanwhile, they hope to see more stealth (and not-so-stealth) contributions from yarn-bombers to the village public art scene.

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