

Palo Alto Weekly

Happy places: Artist develops happiness map of Palo Alto

By Elizabeth Schwyzer

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"Go to your happy place." It's a phrase that's often uttered with a tone of syrupy cynicism, as if the pursuit of happiness necessarily connotes a childish escape from reality.

But that's not at all how Kate Pocrass sees it. The Oakland-based artist has long been fascinated by people's relationship with place, the way they interact with their environment and their ability to enhance the pleasure they draw from an apparently mundane daily commute simply by looking closely at their surroundings.

Pocrass is the artist behind the Palo Alto "happiness map," a project funded by the City of Palo Alto. Last month, she sent out a public survey asking residents to describe a particular spot in the city that made them happy. One month later, having collected nearly 400 responses, Pocrass closed the survey and began looking at the data she'd gathered, considering how best to share it with the community at large.

On Saturday, Sept. 19, the Palo Alto Art Center will open "Front Yard/Backstreet," a group exhibition focused on people and their relationships to their communities. Included in the exhibition will be Pocrass' happiness map, copies of which will be available free to the public. The 20- by 30-inch artistic poster will incorporate all of the survey's results, though it will feature some spots more prominently than others. It will also include statistics regarding the spots Palo Altans named among their top happy places.

While some responses Pocrass received were unique to one individual, other happy spots were shared by a group of respondents. Parks, open spaces, cafes and theaters ranked among the most popular choices, but supermarkets, blood banks and even City Hall's council chambers got a few shout-outs.



Artist Kate Pocrass is creating a happiness map of Palo Alto that will be available for free to the public. Photo by Stian Rasmussen.

S O U T H E R N E X P O S U R E

"There were some that were very personal, like people's back yards, or a specific buckeye tree near a certain neighborhood bridge over the creek where a woman used to catch polliwogs when she was a kid," explained Pocrass during a recent phone interview. "People's answers have been so much more detailed than I thought they would be."

At first, Pocrass had intended to canvass in person but soon realized that an online survey actually allowed for more unguarded responses.

This is not the first time Pocrass has embarked on a project to illuminate the ways community members interact with the landscape around them, nor is it the first time she has extended a public invitation to participate in the art-making process. "Mundane Journeys," part of a 2001 curated group show at San Francisco's Southern Exposure gallery, consisted of a business card with a phone number on it. Participants who called the number would be given a set of instructions guiding them to a specific spot in the city and giving them a task to follow.

"I would give very pointed little thing to do when you got there: 'Notice a skyscraper made entirely out of mosaic tiles,' 'Order No. 32 on the menu' or 'Check out the upholstered tree stump,'" Pocrass recalled of the project, an archive of which remains online at mundanejourneys.com.

Based on that work, Pocrass received a series of grants to publish books based on "Mundane Journeys"; an editor with Chronicle Books eventually published a version of the project that allows travelers to use it wherever they go.

With the Palo Alto happiness map, the idea is similar: Anyone who picks up a free copy will have both an original work of art and a guide for discovering the world around them.

Karen Kienzle, director of the Palo Alto Art Center, has been following Pocrass' career since Mundane Journeys. "I love how democratic her work is," Kienzle said. "This a piece of art that everyone in community can have. I also love that her work is about getting us to see things in a new light. My hope is that her project might turn us on to aspects of Palo Alto we're not familiar with."

Furthermore, Kienzle noted, Pocrass' work approaches themes of connection and exploration in a very different way from the social networking and GPS mapping solutions of this high-tech era.

"We're more connected than we're ever been, but many cultural critics have identified the fact that we're disconnected from our neighborhoods and our communities," she noted, calling Pocrass' work "an antidote to that. It's low-tech. You can hold it and take it away with you."

Getting out and exploring one's immediate surroundings is both Pocrass' invitation and her working method.

"My process changes depending on what I am working on, but it always starts with a lot of walking," she wrote in a blog. "There is no better way to see the world than wandering slowly with eyes wide open." Her process for the Palo Alto happiness map has included visiting the happy places mentioned in the survey. In the name of research, she has eaten eclairs at The Prolific Oven, visited the historic Stanford Theatre and discovered the redwood tree grove at Peers Park where a plaque commemorates the seedling that traveled into outer space on the Challenger.

The Palo Alto happiness map project has met resistance from some critics, who have called the project "childish," challenged the allocation of public funds for the project (the city is paying \$5,000 to print 10,000 copies of the map, while the nonprofit Palo Alto Art Center Foundation is paying Pocrass a \$2,000 fee for her work) and suggested that given the many challenges the city currently faces, such focus on happiness is naive and poorly timed.

Kienzle responded to these allegations with openness and curiosity.

"We know that art can generate a wide range of interpretations and opinions, and it's great when it evokes a constructive dialogue," she said. "One of the criticisms I thought was interesting was this is not the right time for a happiness map because Palo Alto faces so many issues right now. To my mind, Pocrass isn't being a Pollyanna at all. Her work suggests that despite the issues we face as a community, we can still find and celebrate the places in our city that make us happy."

Claudia Keith, chief communications officer for the City of Palo Alto, described the happiness map as fitting perfectly with the city's ongoing top initiative "to create community connections and foster civic engagement."

"We thought having people identify those places and having a visual poster would be a great realization this goal," she said, adding that she saw the project as dovetailing with the City Council's 2015 "healthy city/healthy community" priority in that it helps foster a healthy culture.

Pocrass, for her part, noted that "scrutiny is inevitable in any publicly funded project."

"I understand people's request for wanting to know how much of their tax dollars are being spent on public art," she wrote. "Whether or not they like the projects that the city decides to fund is another matter. It is an impossible task to please an entire city. Instead I can only hope that my project is creating a healthy dialogue between those who are interested in the project and those who are not fond of it."

Those who are interested in the project eagerly await the show's opening, when they can get their hands on their own copy of the happiness map and enjoy an artist's rendering of Palo Altans' favorite spots. The most intrepid explorers might even discover new happy places of their own.

What: Palo Alto happiness map, part of "Front yard/Backstreet"

Where: Palo Alto Art Center, 1313 Newell Road

When: Sept. 19 to Dec. 13. Gallery hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday, 1-5 p.m.; Thursday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Cost: Free

Info: Go to cityofpaloalto.org/artcenter or call 650-329-2366.