"For My Relations" exterior ceramic mural by Judith Inglese

WHAT TILES TELL

Judith Inglese's murals embody a classic sense of myth and communal memory

BY LAURA HOLLAND

Judith Inglese stands surrounded by pieces of the ceramic mural she is creating as a public art project for the city of Rockville, Maryland. Tiles illustrating the area's agricultural roots are packed in bubble wrap, ready to be shipped from Inglese's studio in a converted church building in Amherst. Playful chickens loom larger than life in the left foreground, alongside an almost life-sized cow.

But Inglese's design also includes the slave labor that sustained Rockville's early rural economy, and an actual historical figure believed to be the model for Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom" character. Tiles laid out across the studio floor evoke a vanished small town life, including players in Rockville's former all-black baseball team, the beloved Milo Theater (now torn down), and cherished town clock (also long gone). Current-day Rockville emerges in still unglazed tiles stacked on tables, depicting today's highly diverse city with its high-rise buildings and economy based on medical and scientific research. And on the far right, a scene of children at play suggests the future and refers back to the bucolic past, just as the design elements from one time frame flow into another.

Inglese favors free form tiles, with the shape of the tile reflecting visual content. "I like the line work of the grout joints," she explains, "and how it enhances the design." (In contrast, square tiles detract from the design because people have to look beyond the grid to see the image.)

Since this mural will be installed low to the ground, she aims to make the tiles attractive and "touchable." Surfaces that are textured and tactilely enticing, decorated with colorful glazes and suggestions of folk art, explicitly invite people to slow down, take a look, and linger awhile. Details drawn from local history add life and character, to reveal Rockville's particular story. Inglese willingly accepts the challenge of connecting to the community as she works in the arena of public art.

Art, she firmly believes, should make a difference. "That is a motivating factor for me," she says. "Otherwise I'd just be a dentist." She implies no slur on dental hygiene, however. Years ago, she and her husband, architect Tulio Inglese, offered to put their skills to work in a developing country. As she recalls, the staff member at a volunteer service agency voiced his doubts: "If you were dentists, we could use you. But art? Is it necessary?" After more than twenty-five years of experience in public art, Inglese can eloquently affirm the relevance of art.

"I feel and I've seen that art really does make a difference in a person's life—to make the world more beautiful, to give people the ways and means to express their creativity," she says. A former anthropology major, she notes that people in all cultures decorate themselves and develop mythologies—and these activities that might seem to have no practical purpose actually serve some inherent human need. "We need to feel our uniqueness as individuals at the same time that we feel we are part of a community, and art, especially public art, has that capacity," she says.

Reflecting the site and the surrounding community, her works vary in subject and scale. Some are small and discrete, like the fourteen-by-twenty-two-inch terra cotta plaques stamped with text and installed on buildings in downtown Amherst. Others define a large public space, like the colorful frieze stretching the length of an entire building in Immokalee, Florida. With the ceramic murals she designs for schools, hospitals, community centers, and other public places, Inglese creates an engaging form of art that can be deeply meaningful for individuals and play an important role in the larger community.

The Hearts and Hands Family Tile Making Project at the Baystate Medical Center Children's Hospital in Springfield demonstrates one way that art can make a difference. As part of a mural commissioned by Baystate, Inglese proposed a border of tiles made by children being treated in the hospital. In the ongoing project that evolved from this idea, children and family members design commemorative tiles that are installed in the hospital mural.

Inglese works with parents, grandparents, siblings, and the children themselves, helping them craft six-by-six inch low-relief tiles. For family members, the process of designing the tiles offers an opportunity to concentrate on an essential aspect of the child's spirit, and the tiles become personal memorials, handmade and heartfelt expressions of love. One severely ill boy made a tile for his baby brother; a father made tiles for twins who had died at birth; one mother whose child died of AIDS decorated a tile with symbolic details of the child's life; another mother and young child together made a tile picturing a deceased toddler's favorite toy; and one boy, who died of a brain tumor, had a truck outlined on his tile because his father was a truck driver.

"I was a little afraid before I started this, and I feared it would be depressing," she acknowledges. Instead, she continues, "It made me all the more aware of the healing power of art." As she explains it, the tile-making activity can become a spiritual endeavor for family members: "Shaping images and choosing words helped them to remember lost ones or to assure that they would be remembered." The tile making process, in aiming to capture the child's essential spirit or soul and not the physical body, suggests a truly transformative power of art.

Inglese also has worked on community tile making in Shutesbury, served as a consultant with art teacher Susan Boss for a ceramic project in the Leverett Elementary School, incorporated tiles made by South Hadley teenagers in a mural at the middle school, and given a workshop for fifth and sixth graders at The Common School, in Amherst, to design, fabricate, and install a ceramic tile mural. She compares these collaborative activities to communal endeavors like quilt making and barn raising. "You express yourself and relate to everybody else as you create a larger image," she says.

The ceramic frieze she designed for Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA) in Immokalee, Florida, convinced her "more than ever that art can make a difference" at the community level. A non-profit organization founded to help children in migrant and low-income rural families, RCMA operates charter schools, Head Start programs and daycare centers, and offers classes in literacy, health, parenting, and staff development. RCMA headquarters in Immokalee occupy a concrete building that spans an entire block, with two long walls curving into the central entrance.

"For My Relations," close-up

For this vast expanse, Inglese designed a horizontal frieze of freeform handmade tiles, with six-inch square quarry tiles below and commercial tiles above.

Two hundred and eight feet long (eighty-eight feet on each exterior wall and sixteen feet on each interior wall), the frieze celebrates the history and the people of Immokalee. The left wall displays the natural environment and indigenous people,

Bricktiles, a commissioned project by Judith Inglese and Helena Dooley, includes (top) "commagertile" and "margulistile."

the arrival of the Spaniards, and the advent of agriculture based on migrant labor from Mexico, Haiti, Guatemala, and other countries. The right wall depicts present-day farming, lively local street and market scenes, and family life with children at play and in school.

Inglese found community reaction to this project particularly gratifying. Nobody walked by indifferently, she recalls. Adults and children frequently stopped to trace the history—their own history—on the walls. In her project blog she wrote, "It was rewarding to work for an organization that was trying to improve the life of the rural poor. It was equally encouraging that RCMA recognized the need of people to have more than material necessities. ..."

As she notes, public art holds creative power. It can claim a public space and humanize a setting with its content, color, and design. And it can tell a community's story and convey communal values and ideas. "Most importantly," she sums up, "art can represent feelings and celebrate hope and dreams, which are essential to human existence."