

Diverse group embraces open offer to create art

Jill Tucker, Chronicle Staff Writer

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The idea was simple: Set up some tables in public areas, add paintbrushes, pens, pastels and blank white paper, then put up a big "Free" sign and see what happens.

Art happened.

Abstract art by moms toting toddlers. Scenic scenes by cubicle-bound corporate types on a lunch break. Swirly art by homeless people and cartoons crafted by older women on shopping trips.

Organizers of the first Take 5: Art Break Day, Lauren Odell Usher and Lisa Rasmussen, surveyed the stream of people who took a seat at their tables in Justin Herman Plaza on Friday and did art.

"We feel that everybody should have the opportunity to do art for free," said Rasmussen, an abstract painter.

And often.

"We feel art should be something people should do on a daily basis, like eating, sleeping, exercising," added Odell Usher, a creative reuse artist. "It's emotionally and mentally beneficial."

Art has gotten the short shrift when it comes to public spending, especially in schools, said the founders of the nonprofit Art Is Moving, which is pushing the free art idea.

Creativity isn't valued like other subjects and that's to the detriment of society, Usher said.

The pair set up five locations across the Bay Area - in Oakland, Richmond, San Rafael, Berkeley and San Francisco.

Within three hours at Justin Herman Plaza, more than 50 people had pulled up a chair. The other sites reported strong interest as well.

At one point, a homeless man sat next to a well-dressed woman, the two chatting about their paintings.

Yet getting started wasn't always easy. Some participants stared at the white paper, an anxious look on their face.

"Just start," Rasmussen said gently. "Art can be anything."

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Mallory Buss, 3, already knew that.

The preschooler sat at the table swirling orange across her paper, the paint piling up thick and goopy. Then she painted her hand purple before noting that white was her favorite color.

"She's painting anything that's sitting still," said her mom, Angie Buss. "This is such a treat for her."

Across the table, 7-year-old Quentin Tull sat quietly drawing and painting for nearly an hour, as his mom rested nearby in the sun. He first drew an abstract painting that included a tiger. Then he drew the Golden Gate Bridge.

The best part of drawing?

"Making it look cool," Quentin said without looking up.

His mom, Angel Tull, checked on his progress and then glanced at the half a dozen painters sitting at the tables, hunched over their own pieces of art exactly like Quentin.

"I like the idea that so many adults are painting," she said.

As the plaza filled for the noon hour, Eric Harman plopped down in a chair, grabbed a paintbrush, and swept red paint up and down the white paper in front of him.

It was the first time in a long time the 35-year-old systems installer had done art of any kind.

"I just walked over here to eat a hot dog," he said.

But he couldn't resist what he called the freedom that comes with making art.

Life is full of "speed limits and one-way streets," he said. "With art, nobody can tell you you can't do that."

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