

'Take 5' and make some art

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Some people believe making art is a solitary activity conducted behind closed studio doors and reserved for a chosen few.

But Lauren Odell Usher and Lisa Rasmussen, founders of Art Is Moving, think that painting and drawing can be enjoyed by anyone, even in the company of total strangers sitting at a table under the sun.

It's an idea the artists and friends began testing two years ago with the ARTcart, a mobile studio they've pushed onto city streets, inviting the public to pick up paintbrushes and pens and jump into some impromptu art-making.

Their newest venture, "Take 5: Art Break Day," happening Friday, is an eight-hour creative marathon scheduled to occur simultaneously in five cities across the Bay Area.

Funded by money and supplies donations from participating cities as well as from businesses and individuals, the event is the first in what the pair hope becomes an annual tradition. Geared for "everybody," Art Break Day reflects the duo's belief that making art can be enjoyed by anyone anytime.

"We want everyone to take a break and make a little art and see what it does for them," Usher says.

The idea is simple. From 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., everyone is invited to take a few minutes, grab a seat and get creative at specific sites in Richmond, Berkeley, Oakland, San Francisco and San Rafael. Tables will be set up at bustling spots such as Justin Herman Plaza in downtown San Francisco and Oakland's Frank H. Ogawa Plaza.

Volunteer site leaders will provide brushes, paints, paper, pencils and crayons at no charge. It's a chance for people to give art-making a try, get their creative juices flowing and take their treasures home.

"We want to make art part of the scenery," says co-organizer Usher, "not to just look at but participate in."

That's something Usher and Rasmussen, a fellow John F. Kennedy University arts program alumnus, have been working toward since they started collaborating three years ago. Usher, a photographer and printmaker who lives in Oakland, and Rasmussen, a Los Angeles-based painter and installation artist, share the belief that making art is as vital as eating, sleeping and exercising and, Usher says, just as beneficial.

"Imagine a world if everyone took a few minutes to make art," she says. "What kind of world would that be?"

The pair have been wondering that since 2008, when they started artismoving.blogspot.com. But in addition to creating an online forum on their blog, they wanted to address common fears people have about art-making, specifically the fear of diving in because of the tendency to be self-critical.

So in 2009, they dreamed up the ARTcart, and pushed it up and down Telegraph Avenue in Oakland. They'd pick a random spot, set up shop and invite people to create. Some kept their paintings and drawings. Others donated them to Usher and Rasmussen, who displayed them at the city's CultureFest that year.

"When people sit around the table and make art together, boundaries are crossed," Usher says. "Strangers become friends."

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The cart gave Camille Pires and her school-age daughter, Asia, the opportunity to craft something beautiful while sitting side by side.

"We don't typically make art together," says the El Cerrito resident, describing her ARTcart pit stop in Oakland's Koreatown.

Pires, who considers herself an insecure artist, says she normally buys supplies such as watercolors and paper for her daughter but doesn't typically take part in Asia's creative process. "I'm not like my daughter in terms of doing art," she says.

She's just the type of person San Rafael site leader Mark Lindsey hopes to encourage during Art Break Day.

"It's about getting people to release themselves," says Lindsey, a former ARTcart participant. "A lot of people approach art like 'I can't make it' or 'I can't draw,' but we really don't care about any of that. All we care is that people sit down and play and explore creativity."

Usher and Rasmussen are certainly not the first to hold a communal art-making event in the Bay Area. Oakland's Pro Arts, a nonprofit organization supporting visual artists, held a similar art-making event during Oakland's Art and Soul festival a few years ago in an attempt to challenge the public's perceptions of what art can be and where art-making can take place. But Pro Arts executive director Margo Dunlap says it's rare to see people organize one so large in scale.

"They're taking a very bold step," Dunlap says. There's always personal risk in making art, she explains, referring to the ways artists invest their time, skills and emotions. Rasmussen and Usher are doing this on a grand scale.

The pair's mission is so in sync with that of the Oakland-based nonprofit arts center that Pro Arts decided to become a community partner.

Event

What: Take 5: Art Break Day

When: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday

Where: Justin Herman Plaza, San Francisco; San Rafael City Plaza, San Rafael; Garden Park, Richmond; at Vine and Shattuck streets, Berkeley; Frank H. Ogawa Plaza, Oakland

Admission: Free

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