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# Spots of color in the city

By **Mike Morris** | November 9, 2015 | Updated: November 9, 2015 9:10pm

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Photo: Elizabeth Conley, Staff

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## IMAGE 1 OF 6

Studio owner Noah Quiles, left, and artist Anat Ronen check out the second mural Ronen created on a utility box in the Westchase District after the first was painted over by a graffiti abatement worker.

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Anat Ronen painted the Westchase District's first "mini-mural" last Thursday, turning a gray electrical box at the corner of Richmond and Rogerdale into art.

Westchase officials immediately took photos. Neighborhood beautification in action.

Hours later, the municipally sanctioned tableau was spotted by the district's graffiti abatement guy who, well, abated it.

Ronen's exuberant renderings of a frog, a crocodile and a pelican on the traffic box's sides were redacted with gray paint, leaving bits of marshy green and watery blue visible around the edges.

It's the only hiccup so far in a growing program that has paid Ronen and other street artists to produce nearly three dozen mini-murals around the city. Even more are planned for next year as part of an effort aimed at fostering civic pride through street art.

"I just think that it's completely ironic that a piece of art, or a mini-mural, was vandalized by the people who stop vandalism," said Noah Quiles, owner of UP Art Studio on Elysian Street north of downtown, who first proposed the mini-mural idea. "I find it really funny."

More than a dozen artists have painted 34 utility boxes to date, most of them in City Councilman Larry Green's District K in the southwest. Another 52 are planned next year in District K, in the area around Hobby Airport, and in Westchase, Midtown and the East End.

Houston has 2,400 traffic control boxes, plenty of 8-foot-by-4-foot canvases to go around. Each mural costs \$2,500, \$1,000 of which goes to the artist.

### *An honest mistake*



Louis Jullien, who coordinated the mural for Westchase, offered a simple explanation for the snafu: The district's graffiti abatement employee hadn't heard about the project because he works part time and doesn't attend staff meetings.

"It was an honest mistake. Our public safety director called him and he said, 'Wow, these graffiti artists are getting really good,' " Jullien said, recalling the graffiti staffer's reaction to the mural. "But it also speaks to how good he is at his job because it wasn't up for more than 24 hours. Even going back, if we had a little sit-down and were like, 'OK, who needs to be aware of this?' I still don't think we would have thought of him to say, 'Hey, don't paint over the artwork.' "

Jullien said he hopes to commission another 10 mini-murals next year at similarly busy intersections; Richmond and Rogerdale, right outside Beltway 8, sees an estimated 40,000 cars per day.

The marsh scene was the seventh mini-mural for Ronen, an Israeli who came to Houston to work in real estate and became a painter six years ago. She also has painted a 250-foot mural at Blackshear Elementary School, an armadillo in the East End at Polk and St. Emanuel, and contributed to the mural series promoting the Houston Zoo's new gorilla habitat.

"When this started I was kind of skeptical because I was like, it's so tiny, how much of a difference would it make? But it does a lot," she said. "It's just a sparkle of color in the corner of your eye, and it really makes a difference."

Linda Scurlock, who lives in Green's District K and leads the South Houston Concerned Citizens Coalition, said the program dovetails with residents' efforts to plant trees and keep abandoned lots mowed.

She also likes that the murals near Madison and Westbury high schools display a marlin and a husky, the schools' respective mascots.

"It brings some value to the neighborhood, some beautification. Everybody has noticed them,"

Scurlock said. "Out here in Hiram Clarke, we're cleaning it up and greening it up, so anything that can help us look better, we appreciate it."

Green said he pursued the program in his district in part for beautification and in part for economic development, to spur renewed interest in the area.

"Prior to the mini-mural project, District K only had two pieces of civic art. And so I would see all this arts funding around the city, and it was focused inside the Loop, and there was really no civic art outside of the Loop," Green said, noting the vast majority of his district is outside Loop 610. "I saw it as an inexpensive way to bring art into an area but also a way to instill civic pride."

### *A second attempt*

Quiles, whose studio handles the program's logistics so artists have only to paint, initially was concerned that Ronen's work had been tampered with by another street artist, one disgruntled enough to break all conventions of underground art and tag another's work. His first emotion upon learning it had been mistaken for graffiti was not anger, he said, but relief.

"The streets generally tend to police themselves. If a piece of art is created, you're not to ruin it unless you mean to deface it, and when one defaces it, one can be ostracized from the street art or the art community," Quiles said.

"It's a true affront to an individual and organization. That's why I was tremendously relieved, because our mission is civic pride through civic art."

As a painter and not a graffiti artist, as well as older than many of the young men drawn to the field, Ronen said she couldn't imagine who would have a "beef" with her.

"It was a great relief that it wasn't anything political," she said.

Still, she liked her original version more than the second attempt, which she finished Sunday.



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