

Artspace

RxART Founder Diane Brown on How Artists, Like Marcel Dzama Are Making the Hospital Visit More Hospitable for Kids

By Artspace Curatos
October 9, 2020



Laura Owens Installation at Cedars-Sinai Maxine Dunitz Children's Health Center

The testimonies from doctors, parents and patients on RxART's website say it all. This non-profit organization, set up by Diane Brown 20 years ago with a mission to make the hospital experience more comforting for children by commissioning contemporary artists to transform sterile healthcare facilities into engaging and inspiring environments, has completed 51 projects with 60 artists in nearly 40 hospitals throughout 21 cities in the U.S.

However, it's comments like this one from Christina Mangurian, M.D. at San Francisco General Hospital, that say more than the numbers do: "You should sleep well knowing that you have made 1000 patients living in San Francisco much, much happier (and their doctors and nurses, too)" Mangurian wrote.

Artists who've lent a helping hand to RxART over the years include: KAWS, Jonas Wood, Rob Pruitt, Rashid Johnson and Alex Israel among others. As the organisation gets ready to unveil it's latest collaboration with Marcel Dzama, who has created an exclusive Artspace print to accompany the commission, called *The Illumination of the sisters of paradise*, 2020, we caught up with founder Diane Brown to talk about RxART and the Dzama edition.

Was there a personal experience that prompted the program? I had to have a CT-Scan and was extremely anxious. I was afraid the doctors would find what they were looking for (they did not!). As I lay on the gurney, all I wanted was to get out of that room. My only escape was in my imagination. I imagined a Matthew Ritchie painting going across the ceiling and became completely involved in that imagery. The test was over and I felt as if I had not even been there! I wanted to do the same for other people. What sort of reaction do you tend to get from artists when you contact them? Artists are always so generous and generally excited to participate. We pay artists an honorarium as well as all fabrication, installation, travel and

incidental expenses - but the real payment is knowing they are changing a child's experience for the better - and improving the working environment for caregivers.

How does the process work? Generally we are approached by a hospital - or sometimes a grateful patient or hospital supporter will reach out on behalf of a hospital with which they are involved. We have a conversation with hospital leadership and if they are interested, we begin a conversation about where an RxART project would make the biggest difference. Once we have agreed upon a department or unit, we would usually visit the hospital. In this time of COVID we ask for floor plans and photographs to give us an idea of the space. Our team discusses which artists we think would be most ideal for the project and propose them to the hospital. When the hospital agrees on an artist, we reach out to the artist to see if they are interested in the project. If they are, we can begin our conversation in earnest. We are fortunate to have a pro bono architectural partner, HKS. If accurate floor plans and elevations do not exist, they will measure the space for us and take photographs. The artist makes a proposal to the hospital. There is usually a committee that must approve the proposal. Once that is done we can move forward with fabrication - whether it is a wrap for a CT-Scan machine, wall paper, or a sculpture. Every project is produced at no cost to the hospital, so we begin fundraising for the project as soon as the artist is approved and the scope and budget are determined.

How engaged are the artists in the process? The artists are very engaged. This is their work. While it is not a gallery or museum exhibition, the installation is meant to be there for many years. Their work will be seen by thousands of children and their families. The artists ask about the patient population and then specific details of the space and enlist their studio teams to assist with the project.



Marcel Dzama
The Illumination of the sisters of paradise, 2020.
Edition of 30 signed, numbered and printed on Hahnemühle German Etching 310 gsm paper. Artwork © Marcel Dzama Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

What criteria do you use when selecting potential artists to approach? We select artists whose work we think are most appropriate and who will have the most positive impact on the patients, their families and the hospital staff.

Can you pick some of your favorite images and tell us what you like about them? My favorites are always the projects we are doing at that moment! We work with the most astonishing artists! Every time an artist agrees to do a project we are super happy. I am so proud of all of our projects and so appreciative of the generous artists with whom we work. We have just completed the installation of a fabulous project by Derrick Adams at NYC Health + Hospitals/Harlem in the pediatric emergency department. The extension to the emergency department at Children's National Hospital in Washington, DC of Jonas Wood's privacy curtains is nearly completed and should be installed in October. The first phase of this project has been incredibly successful and we are excited to be able to extend it. A major project by Nicolas Party for Children's Hospital Los Angeles is just heading to the fabricator. Nicolas has designed a mural for a very sensitive and very long corridor (leading from the main hospital to the operating rooms) at CHLA.

What are the sort of things the kids say to you about their experiences of the art? When we had the ribbon cutting for Rob Pruitt's project in the radiology department at CHOC Children's in Orange County, CA a 9-year-old girl spoke. She had been having CT-Scans for a chronic issue since she was 2-years-old and said she was always afraid that the machine would swallow her - but now it seemed like fun. The children at Cedars-Sinai have also been enthusiastic about the fabulous art on the ceilings of the inpatient rooms created by Urs Fischer, Laura Owens and Sam Falls. A nurse reported that one child who unfortunately required frequent hospitalization, asked with excitement if he could have one of the "elephant rooms this time."

Do any of the artists involved visit the hospitals to see how their work has been used? Yes. Rob Pruitt visited CHOC to see how his work was received; Kenny Scharf visited Kings County and had a Q & A with the patients. Both Rob Pruitt and Will Cotton visited St. Jude after their work was installed. Dan Colen visited St. Mary's several weeks after the ribbon cutting to join the hospital staff and outpatients during a music class held in the activity center that his work had transformed.

Does it help the staff working there too, to create a more pleasant atmosphere in what must be often a very challenging environment? Absolutely! The staff at every hospital tells us how much they appreciate the work. They are essentially living in these spaces and a more upbeat environment makes their job easier.

Can you tell us a little about the Marcel Dzama work? We love Marcel's work and are very excited to be working with him on an upcoming project for the pediatric clinic at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto. We are honored that he has agreed to create a print with Phaidon and Artspace to benefit RxART's projects. The print features a large moon, which has figured in much of his recent work, including his series of imagery from his trips to Morocco and Mexico.