

NEXT STOP: DEMOCRACY! BLOG

Philadelphia street-artist inspires with new shade of self-expression

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Photo courtesy of Conrad Benner

Jessie Hemmons knits Philadelphia.

And chances are if you've graced the streets of Center City over the past five years you've caught a flash of her work, perhaps even stopping to ask yourself, your friend, a stranger, what strange soul took it upon herself to cozy-up that tree trunk in neon threads.

That somebody would be Ishknits: self-taught knitter extraordinaire and Hemmons' street alter-ego. Since 2009 Ishknits has been wrapping Philadelphia in swaths of home-knitting, for the sake of art, conversation, and well-intended provocation.

Her projects, ranging from early efforts on unsuspecting trees, phone booths, and statues, to later, commissioned works, including a showcase on the front steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, are all delivered with the same intent: crochet the city with color and curiosity.

Like most street artists, Ishknits' goal is optimal visibility.

“I did a project on the Market-Frankford line and I was thinking, ‘How can I get this to work; how can I make artwork reach everyone in the city?’” Ishknits said. “So, very literally I know that the train is going throughout the city, so there was an opportunity for a vast number of people to be able to access some artwork and interact with it as well.”

For Ishknits, this interaction, between admirer and art is key to enabling the type of conversations she wants her art to spark.

Among these: a feminist look at gender roles.

“Street art in general is pretty male-dominated, just like being assertive is pretty typically masculine, or at least we consider it to be,” Ishknits said. “I really like using what’s considered a mockingly feminine craft and taking advantage of it ironically.”

A 2012 outfitting of the City Hall’s Frank Rizzo statue in (1) hot pink bikini, was her rendering of an ice-breaker on the subject.

Although the bikini-bomb lasted only three minutes before being cut down by security guards, “people who were present seemed to actually enjoy it,” Ishknits said.

“[The Rizzo project] was really multi-faceted, but I think what’s important is how we view men putting on women’s clothes as disrespectful. If I were to put a suit on a woman’s statue I don’t think anyone would balk, but the fact that I put a bikini on a man really changes the conversation.”

Ishknits knack for shedding light on the abandoned encompasses both the city’s ideological lapses, as well as gaps in its structural upkeep.

Among the most desirable canvasses for her knit-work are Philadelphia’s vacant and decaying buildings.

“I always tend to find a relationship between the structural environment and the socio-cultural state of the neighborhood. And then I think about the empathetic [...] nature of [...] handcrafting objects. And this makes me want to cover these crumbling structures in knitting, to reflect my hope for the neighborhood and those within it,” Ishknits said in a 2012 interview with David Stark.

However, Ishknits is also wary of forcing her art, and with it her views, on any one, undesiring section of the city.

“I don’t want to feel like some sort of imperialist,” she said, “Although, I really do want to use my work to try and enhance neighborhoods, I feel like there’s a more proper way to do it than to just go in there and put pieces up.”

Ideally enough, Ishknits newest project will allow her this opportunity.

This fall, Ishknits will be working with Next Stop: Democracy!, a project collaborating with 60 artists throughout the city in the creation of “Vote Here” signs to be installed near polling places for Philadelphia’s 2015 mayoral election. The intent of the project is to revitalize the

election process with a newfound sense of vibrancy and to celebrate the importance of the democratic right to contribute.

“As a street artist I feel self-expression is really important, and this project is one way all of us as Americans are capable of asserting our opinion,” Ishknits said.

When asked if she had drafted any ideas for what her sign would look like Ishknits affirmed, assuredly:

“I mean I know it’ll be knit.”