FEATURE

Sculptures Greet Super Bowl Visitors

Rutgers graduate aims to create positive first impression of New Jersey through parents’ art foundation

By Lisa Intrabartola  |  Thursday, January 30, 2014

New Jerseyans can take a joke. When national media depicts our state as a sprawling Superfund site and reduces our citizens to Sopranos caricatures, we maintain our sense of humor.

But when they mistakenly associate our stadium – and by extension our first Super Bowl – with New York, no one on this side of the Hudson is laughing.

“I think of New Jersey as the kid sister to New York who is somehow not invited to the party,” says 2006 Rutgers graduate Athena Barat, 30, creative director of the Newark-based Barat Foundation, a nonprofit art education corporation. “The truth is, that kid sister is growing up and becoming a beautiful woman who is hard to ignore.”

To help New Jersey turn heads and make a positive first impression on out-of-state guests during Super Bowl week, the Barat Foundation is lending six of its animodules – large-scale sculptures created by artists and members of the Newark community – to Newark Liberty International Airport. The 8-foot-high wooden sculptures – an eagle, chef, graduate, peace totem, elephant and dragonfly – arrived in the newly renovated Terminal B on Jan. 25 and will be on display indefinitely.

Started in 1997 by Athena’s parents Gary and Chandri Barat, The Barat Foundation knows a thing or two about using art to shift public perception and bind communities. “We are in the business of rebranding Newark and New Jersey. The ports of New Jersey are tough – when you arrive at the airport, when you go down the Turnpike – they are not the prettiest scenery,” Barak says. “As someone who grew up in New Jersey and went to school in New Jersey and really knows the
The name “animodule” is short for “animated module,” an art form created in 2006 by Terry Brewin, a teacher at Newark’s Vocational High School. Animodules are designed and painted during 40-hour, artist-in-residence programs by teams of community members and students – who range from adjudicated youth to children living in public housing projects – with help from a teacher who coordinates the project.

The sculptures, dedicated this summer by former Mayor Cory Booker as “Newark’s Official Peace Ambassadors,” have been on view at Newark schools and other city institutions, as well as the Izod Center.

And now, they will greet international passengers touching down in Newark. “I feel like at that first moment when they arrive, the animodules are the cultural gate keepers of Newark and New Jersey,” Barat says.

While at Rutgers, the American studies major had her first experience organizing a public art event to help forge ties between the Mason Gross School and New Brunswick. The event, “This Town Needs a Parade,” drew crowds of 300 to 400 to watch handmade floats and sculptures constructed from shopping carts and found material.

“I learned at Rutgers that you could take to the street with art like that in a handmade community way,” she says. “Communicating within Mason Gross was a beautiful way to prepare me for communicating in a city. It was an incredibly educational moment for me.”

After joining her parent’s foundation, Barat suggested a similar street venue for Newark. The Barat Foundation approached Brewin about replicating her sculptures on a large scale to serve as the parade’s backbone. Constructed from donated 8-foot-sheets of cardboard and decoupaged by kindergarten classes and other Newark youth, the first animodules were featured in the Newark Arts Parade in 2008.
The Super Bowl creates another opportunity to display the unique pieces, which have been favorably received in their new location.

“They love them. They want more,” says Barat of the response the foundation has received from airport officials. “We are calling all the schools today to see if we can borrow anymore of them.”

Raised in Morris County, Barat lives in South Orange and her parents call Newark home. Before the foundation, the Barats ran one of the first organic food companies in America. Her parents, she says, introduced the public to tofu in the early 1980s.

After Barat’s father was diagnosed with HIV in 1989, the entrepreneurs decided to leave the business world and pursue their passions. For Gary, that meant returning to his roots as a photographer. For Chandri, it meant returning to Paris, where she spent her junior year of college studying at the Sorbonne. The foundation was created from their shared desire to introduce underprivileged students to the arts and international study.

“It’s about using art to heal and finding your purpose in life,” Athena says. “For my father, it’s what has kept him alive.”

On Feb. 7, the foundation will expand its reach to Terminal C at the airport during an event with the American Heart Association featuring an artist in residence designing and painting a sculpture in the terminal. Passersby will be invited to add to the piece.

The entire Barat family will be in attendance at a Feb. 14 “I Love Terminal B” celebration for the animodules.

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Tags: Super Bowl  rutgers  Mason Gross  This Town Needs a Parade  animodule  Barat Foundation