

Los Angeles Daily News

Nonprofit RxART delivers art therapy to Southern California after a long wait

March 14, 2021
By Jane Greenstein



Detail from Nicolas Party, "Trees for Children" which was just installed along a 207-foot corridor at Children's Hospital Los Angeles as the latest project by the New York-based nonprofit RxART. (Courtesy of Nicolas Party)

A hospital may be the last place you'd expect to see an inspiring piece of art. But Diane Brown, the founder and president of RxART, thinks differently: She's spent the last two decades enlisting a cadre of leading contemporary artists to change that perception.

The latest project Brown's nonprofit organization, whose mandate is to "help children heal through the extraordinary power of visual art," is a mural by Swiss art star Nicolas Party. It occupies the long 207-foot corridor of Children's Hospital of Los Angeles (CHLA.)

According to a statement from Chuck Pickering, VP, Facilities & Support Services at CHLA, "The RxART installation will reside in a corridor that will provide a positive, healing environment for thousands of patients, families and CHLA team members each year."

Originally slated to be unveiled last spring before the pandemic hit, Party's mural "Trees for Children" is printed on a vinyl wall covering much like wallpaper. CHLA said the mural was installed this morning, March 14, when there was minimal activity in the corridor.

According to Brown, the unintended delay gave Party, whose paintings have sold for more than \$1 million dollars at auction, time to fine tune the mural. "He's so committed to this project," said Brown, a former gallerist and curator, in a recent interview.

The artist used gouache, an opaque paint that has a matte finish, to create work that transforms the corridor leading to the operating room.

The mural depicts a candy-colored forest, complete with brightly colored trees against a pink sky. "Nicolas' work is so whimsical and joyful," said Brown in a phone interview. "It's going to be absolute joy walking down the corridor."

Party's work is the fourth project RxART has mounted during the pandemic, including a Takashi Murakami project at Children's National Hospital in Washington, D.C., Brown said. It's also the latest RxART work to occupy the interiors of Southern California hospitals, including Children's Hospital of Orange County (CHOC). CHLA is already the beneficiary of RxART's projects, housing a few of Los Angeles icon Ed Ruscha's "Mountain Prints" series.

Party, who, like Brown, is New York-based, says he is thrilled to work with RxART. "They do incredible projects with artists who I really admire," he said in a phone interview last year.

Indeed, artists who have received an honorarium for RxART reads like a who's who of the contemporary art world, including mega star Jeff Koons, William Wegman, Kenny Scharf, the Keith Haring Foundation and Los Angeles artist Laura Owens.

RxART was inspired by Brown's own unpleasant experience getting a CAT scan. To distract herself, she imagined a painting by British artist Matthew Ritchie draped across the ceiling and found herself transported by the vision.

"When the test was over I thought, "Oh my God, I want to do this for other people," said Brown. Her health in check, she began her quest to donate museum-quality art to hospitals. RxART was born in 2002.

"My idea was, if I put (up) something challenging in a positive way, then people are actually going to look at it," she said. "If they stop and look for those few minutes or even seconds — if they examine something that's unfamiliar — they're going to be taken out of their situation. They're not going to think about illness or injury."

According to its website, the nonprofit organization has completed 53 projects with 62 artists in 36 hospitals throughout 20 cities nationwide and recently opened an office in Canada. The first site-specific installation occurred in 2006, at the Child Study Center at New York University. This laid the groundwork for recent projects such as American post-conceptualist artist Rob Pruitt's aquatic wonderland (complete with dolphins and pandas) that adorns the CHOC radiology department.

The lure for the artists to work with RxART is simple: Make something that will help children.

Party, 40, who began as a street artist, is known for creating environments with saturated brightly colored pastels, including homages to classical art. Some of the works featured in "Sottobusco", his show last year at Los Angeles gallery Hauser & Wirth, featured a dark forest environment populated by trees, a recurring motif in his work. These also populate "Trees for Children" which was conceived with the understanding that it would not be viewed head-on but perhaps just in glimpses.

"It's really one of those subjects and elements of nature that will always be used (in art)," he said, referring to the tree imagery. "They have this incredible power in terms of meaning and symbols. He mused that "If we're still here in a couple of centuries it will still be one of the elements being painted."

Part of his decision to use gouache to paint the mural was paying tribute to how many children, including himself, are introduced to art through the popular Caran d'Ache Gouache Studio paint sets.

Brown said since the pandemic hit, RxART has continued to work on projects including hosting virtual studio tours with Party and other prominent artists. Last year, a partnership with Los Angeles-based medical apparel company FIGS

produced 2500 each of masks designed by Dan Colen, Pruitt, and Ann Craven. This summer, patients at CHLA will also be the recipients of another RxART donation: 1,000 pairs of pajamas produced by FIGS and designed by Urs Fischer, another renowned Swiss artist. This is part of the "PJ Project" which aims to make an annual donation of a new line of pajamas to select hospitals nationwide.