

BEARS AT A PICNIC

Public art brings endangered wildlife to the table

BY SANDRA SCHULMAN
PHOTOS: PEDRO PENALVER

A new art installation in the City Hall plaza between the Mandel Library and City Hall brings wild bears up close and personal in an installation by WPB artist Diane Arrieta. While fun and unusual, the work has a serious message that is literally on the table.

Arrieta is one of eight local artists commissioned by the ArtLife WPB Committee to create temporary (up to 16 months) public art projects. The Commons is a local artist's initiative that provides funding for local artists to work on public projects. From an open call, the committee selected eight multidisciplinary artists to create artworks whose central theme is 'play'.

"Bear's Picnic is a visual delight with childhood familiarity of picnics and Yogi bears, but with an environmental message," says Sybille Welter, Administrator of Public Art and Culture. "Arrieta's recontextualizing of wildlife with punchy colors in a civic setting speaks volumes of the

artist's witty humor, and her play on the lost connection between humans and animals." "It is also about making connections with one another over lunch, coffee, or with a book and having communal experiences."

"I was one of eight artists chosen by the ArtLife Committee," Arrieta says. "When we had our first meeting, Sybille asked us to think bigger than we've ever thought before. I wanted to continue my conservation work, but I wanted to make it more accessible for people to interact and build community. The idea of a bear picnic popped into my head because of a children's book series I read. "The Bruce the Bear" book by Ryan Higgins. They're hysterically funny."

In her official statement, she said:

The Bear's Picnic project is founded on the belief that all living beings on this planet - humans, animals, and the environment - are interconnected. With a focus on six of the eight bear species threatened with extinction



A large bright yellow bear sits at the picnic table in Diane Arrieta's new public art work in downtown WPB. While fun and playful, the bear also has a serious message of conservation and environmentalism. QR codes on the tables take viewers to sites that give information on the bears and their stories.

due to human activities, the project aims to bring bears into our human environment and share a meal, fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility.

Food is a vital aspect of our daily lives, and meals have always been a cornerstone of family life. The picnic provides an opportunity for reflection, storytelling, and learning, with people interacting with the

bears in a safe and respectful environment.

Arrieta's work shows three bright yellow picnic tables with a yellow bear on each one. Sitting,



Guess who is coming for lunch? Painted yellow - a color alluding to danger - endangered bears are a surprise guest at the picnic.



scratching their nose, or lying down to see what tasty treat may be in the pink wicker basket, these bears are just too big to ignore.

“I just imagine that these bears are sitting in the middle of City Hall Plaza where people stop and eat their lunch. This would be a good way for people to hang out and enjoy each other’s company,” she says. “But the oversized bears are imposing on their space. And the whole idea was that we’re so far removed from nature and our habitat is shrinking. I wanted to bring the bears into our environment so people could reconnect with nature and make bears part of our family.”

Arrieta says Ryan Higgins’ books are funny and his illustrations are right up her alley.

“They’re really cute and funny and draw you in. So that’s what I wanted my work to be, bigger than life so people could just come and sit and enjoy. But then there’s also text on the table describing endangered bears.”

There are QR codes that they can scan, and it takes you to a conservation site that tells you about the bears so they can learn about the world’s species of bear and what risks they are facing.

In real life, it’s no picnic when bears come into campsites and homes searching for food. So, she was deliberate in making the choices for the bears themselves.

This piece is all altered, found ready-made objects because of the budget. Normally, Arrieta doesn’t use sustainable materials that could last outside for a yearlong project. A significant portion of her art practice involves altering found objects to create new artistic expressions. Found objects in her art are deliberate choices that align with her environmental themes.

“As a conceptual artist, I found that ready-made fiberglass bears were the ideal choice of tools for my project. The process of creating the bears was not my primary focus; instead, I developed a concept and then conducted research to identify the most suitable tools and materials to convey it effectively while working within my budget. I just scoured the planet looking for the perfect three bears.”

“I am committed to minimizing my impact on the planet by avoiding unnecessary waste and contributing to consumerism. When I repurpose objects that already exist, I reduce the demand for new resources and minimize my contribution to the growing problem of waste accumulation.”

Arrieta had a company that pre-made them. They were advertised as lawn ornaments or selfie statues for businesses. She thought that was an appropriate metaphor for how far removed we are from nature.

She added ceramic plates to go with them, but the bears were so imposing, there was not enough

room for the plates. Not one to let a creative opportunity pass her by, she says she will do a workshop in the library. She will display the plates, and have a silk screen session where people can make the same bears she did on the plates.

“We use animals in nature as toys or decorations, and we don’t really understand the connectivity of a healthy ecosystem and a healthy food chain. We don’t understand that top predators are all disappearing and in the long run, that affects human health and wellbeing,” she says.

When she got them, they were already painted true to life, a black bear and a panda bear, and a baby black bear. As for the unusual color choices, Arrieta says they have deeper meanings for her that she uses in her work.

“All of my work is in yellow and pink. I use yellow in my work because the danger is dichotomous. Hey, hold on, what are we doing to the planet? Stop and take a minute. But it’s also the color of the sun and hope. So, we have the opportunity to change the fate of the animals. That’s the main color of all my work.”

“Then pink is a sign of hope and a calming color. After you figure it out, oh my God, this isn’t all fun and games. The pink wraps you around and makes you feel better, so it’s a dual meaning with the colors.”

For more information about Diane Arrieta, visit dianearrieta.com