

Signal boxes now traffic in public art

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Few people - except those posting handbills - notice the gray metal boxes at downtown intersections. Freestanding on corners or mounted on poles, they contain traffic signal controls. Once Bob Dascola got the boxes in his sights, the boxes were fated to be art .

The box by city hall at North Fifth Avenue and Ann Street suddenly boasts eye-popping red poppies painted on a light green background by local artists Stephanie Staley and Carla Thompson.

Artist Tomoko Ogawa covered the box at the Diag entrance at South State Street and North University Avenue in eye-catching abstract designs and bold colors.

Dascola, a State Street barber shop owner and longtime downtown booster, led the project, in which local artists are painting designs on some nine traffic control boxes downtown. (Other box artists include Mary Thiefels, Joyce Tinkham, Barb Goodsitt, Sophie Gillet, Connie McKinney, Vickie Elmer, Mike Hahn and Tim Douthit.)

To some, the boxes, several now adorned with graceful floral motifs, are like a reassuring market correction after the oversized colorful footballs of Pigskins on Parade.

Dascola regards the layers of fliers and tape that have until now covered the boxes as litter. Fliers, he says, belong only on kiosks.

Earlier this summer, you could find Dascola out at 7

a.m., scraping and cleaning six of the traffic control boxes so the artists had a clean palette - a job that took about three hours per box, with a couple of fellows to help. "The worst one was at South University and Washtenaw," he says. There were so many layers of tape, he had to use a harsh acetone cleaner.

Three years ago Dascola and downtown leaders hatched the art -on-a-box idea as a way to discourage fliers and spruce up city streets. The Downtown Development Authority provided money for paint. Dascola also led an earlier campaign in which students from kindergarten through college age painted about 35 downtown fire hydrants in colorful designs.

He is pleased with the positive feedback on the boxes from passersby. And, he says, "The flier posters have been respectful of them so far."

Sporting art

Speaking of those parading pigskins ...

The public- art project that brought five-foot-high football-shaped sculptures to city streets in conjunction with the Super Bowl is moving toward its final stage.

The 12 decorated footballs have been removed, taken by program organizers perhaps to the relief of police who had to contend with vandals and pranksters.

The artists who painted and otherwise dressed them up ahead of February's Super Bowl were recalled to do some touch-up work and now they're on display at businesses that paid the \$3,000 fee to "sponsor" a

football or at locations the sponsors selected.

Sponsors who wish to may buy the balls again - this time for a \$2,000 fee. Those not spoken for will be auctioned.

Proceeds from the project will benefit the arts endowment of the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation.

Anne Rueter, News features staff