



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

330 West 42nd Street, 26th floor New York, NY 10036
tel: 212-736-4536 fax: 212-947-9512
www.nyc.gov/mcb4

COREY JOHNSON
Chair

ROBERT J. BENFATTO, JR., ESQ.
District Manager

January 4, 2012

Hon. Christine Quinn
Speaker
NYC Council
City Hall
New York, NY 10036

Re: Belkin Mural at May Matthews Palmer Park

Dear Speaker Quinn:

On December 21, 2011, members of the West 46th Street Block Association, including its current president and treasurer, and Jane Weissman, Project Manager for Rescue Public Murals, came to Community Board 4's Landmarks Preservation Committee to ask for support to restore a public mural in May Matthews/Alexandra Palmer Park on West 45th/46th Streets.

The mural, "Against Domestic Colonialism," was painted in 1972 by Arnold Belkin, an artist of international stature. It is the oldest extant community mural in the City, a mural of historical, cultural, and aesthetic significance, and a work of art whose theme of community empowerment still resonates in Hell's Kitchen/Clinton.

CB4 strongly supports the restoration of the mural planned by Rescue Public Murals and the West 46th Block Association and urges your support to insure this important community landmark is preserved.

Provenance

Located on the wall of 430 West 46th Street that overlooks the May Mathews/Alexandra Palmer Playground, the mural "Against Domestic Colonialism" was one of two public art works commissioned as part of the refurbishment of the playground (then known as Curtis Park) in the early 1970s. Architect Michael J. Altschuler, who redesigned the park, conceived the idea for a mural and selected Arnold Belkin to paint it. McGraw-Hill Companies funded the mural and the community mural organization Cityarts Workshop, Inc. (renamed CITYarts, Inc. in 1989) administered the project. Copyright of "Against Domestic Colonialism" is held by the Estate of Arnold Belkin and CITYarts, Inc.

Over the years, the mural lost its original vibrancy. The concrete stucco parge that covers the brick wall on which it is painted has buckled and separated from the wall and concrete stucco patches cover the top quarter and various areas throughout the mural. Graffiti was sprayed on the bottom quarter of the mural

and to deter further tagging, that part was painted over.

In spite of the damage, CB4's Landmarks Preservation Committee was heartened to learn that not only can the mural be preserved, it can be "recreated" using the original colors and techniques the artist chose. Indeed, should the recreation go forward, the creative team will be led by Arnold Belkin's widow, Patricia Quijano Ferrer, a muralist who studied and collaborated with Belkin on several projects before his death in 1992.

NYC's Oldest Extant Community Mural

"Against Domestic Colonialism" is among the first New York City murals painted as part of the contemporary national mural movement (which began in 1967). Today it is the oldest extant mural from that era. It was painted while Belkin was a professor of art at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and is the only exterior mural he painted in the United States.

Arnold Belkin (1930-92) was a prominent artist of international repute. A Canadian by birth, he worked in Mexico and, on two murals, assisted muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, who along with Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, is known as one of *Los Tres Grandes* of Mexican art. In 1981, Mexico conferred citizenship on Belkin for his outstanding artistic contributions to the country.

The mural's theme of the importance of a community having a voice in planning its built environment exemplifies the debates that raged around urban renewal in New York City from the 1950s to the 1970s. As you know, that theme is still a potent and pertinent concern today, as the Hell's Kitchen/Clinton community is again undergoing rapid change and development.

We The People....

Michael Altschuler, the park's original architect, says the idea for "Against Domestic Colonialism" came from discussions with the community. The mural is split into three separate scenes framed by circles, in the first is a bulldozer against a backdrop of skyscrapers depicting the threat of development; in the other two circles are images of multiracial groups of people looking forward. They hold up flowers, a city block with trees and signs. A sign held up by one woman reads: "*We the people demand control of our communities.*"

It is a sign that might be held up in the neighborhood today

Throughout his career, Belkin used a palette of colors that he identified with specific emotions and focused on recurring themes: social injustice, the rights of the poor and underprivileged, the abuse of power by the rich, and warnings against war and technology that enslaves the human spirit.

In the early 1960s, he and fellow artists founded Nueva Presencia, an aesthetic movement whose style combined elements of Expressionism and modern figurative painting. Denouncing injustice, repression and war, the group espoused art that was, according to its manifesto, "real, human, with social responsibility, eloquent, complete, and universal." These aesthetic qualities are evident in "Against Domestic Colonialism."

The Assessment

In 2007, members of the West 46th Street Block Association, dismayed over the deterioration of the mural, contacted Rescue Public Murals, a project of Heritage Preservation, to explore the feasibility of restoring it. Heritage Preservation, a Washington D.C.-based national organization devoted to preserving the country's cultural artifacts, organized a team to assess whether the 50- by 60-foot work can be repaired. The assessment, funded jointly by the block association and Rescue Public Murals, took place on September 13, 2011.

Patricia Quijano Ferrer, Belkin's widow, brought to the assessment extensive archival documentation on how the mural was designed and painted and, along with conservator Harriet Irgang Alden and historic preservationist Norman Weiss, inspected the mural. Artists who knew Belkin and Altschuler as well as leadership from CITYarts, Inc., also attended the assessment.

The prognosis for restoring the mural, according to Heritage Preservation, was good.

Preserving The Mural

Jane Weissman of Rescue Public Murals presented to CB4's Landmarks Committee an overview of the plans to restore the mural. The plans involved studying original documents used in the execution of the mural and contacting original participants involved in the process. CB4's Landmarks Preservation Committee was persuaded that the extraordinary preparations to preserve the existing mural and the careful process to "recreate" the mural are sound and sensible and in keeping with the artist's original conception of his work.

The Committee was especially gratified to learn that Quijano Ferrer brought from Belkin's archive in Mexico City extensive documentation that informs the treatment plan for the mural. Documentation included Belkin's scrapbooks with his notes, artist statement, and press clipping about "Against Domestic Colonialism," the original maquette (or preliminary sketch) of the mural, along with slides showing each step of the mural being designed and painted.

The proposed restoration of the mural is a partnership of Rescue Public Murals and West 45th and West 46th Street Block Associations with the cooperation of City of New York Parks and Recreation. The restoration will stabilize the mural wall and recreate missing sections of the design while respecting the original intent of the artist, with the aim of preserving the mural for another 20 years.

Provided funding is obtained, the restoration Assessment Report, Against Domestic Colonialism, Arnold Belkin, 1972 will take place in 2012—the 40th anniversary of the mural and the 20th anniversary of Belkin's death.

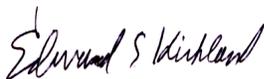
Community Board 4 is convinced that the plan to re-create the mural, with its careful, painstaking research, its intent to apply the artist's original colors and its involvement of the community in the restoration — including employing three young people from the neighborhood as paid assistants to the professional muralists responsible for restoring the mural — will not only fulfill the artist's original concept but also honor the neighborhood for which the mural was designed.

This remarkable work of public art, a work so intimately tied with the aspirations of the community in which it is located, must be preserved. The Board urges your support for this project.

Sincerely,
Sincerely,



Corey Johnson
Chair



Edward Kirkland
Co-Chair
Landmarks Committee

[signed 1/4/2012]

Damyanti Radeshwar
Co-Chair
Landmarks Committee