

Art at the Airport

TRAVEL FACILITIES IN AIR terminals up and down the land would do well to take a page from the idea book of Philadelphia International. Their program of Art in the Airport is a superb model for others to replicate. It offers people of all ages a cost-free opportunity to make the most of their precious gift of sight.

No need for passengers, their families and friends to spend time with nothing to do. In the presence of original art and other objects worthy of contemplation, they have nourishment for the soul, ideas to ponder and visions to behold. Instead of being bored to death, overeating too many high calorie nibbles or drowning their wits in more liquid refreshment than is really good for them, they can take in the equivalent of an art museum or gallery visit. In the process, they may become profoundly enriched and enlightened in a most unusual manner.

In addition, for the serious artist, the program offers a golden opportunity to reach a large and diversified audience, numbering 31 million people a year, and a possible market for otherwise unanticipated sales.

All too often, airports are cold, lack-luster settings. By contrast, the placement of all kinds of original and colorful artworks transforms the normally drab and barren emptiness of the air terminal into a space alive with a unique and warm human presence for which there is no substitute.

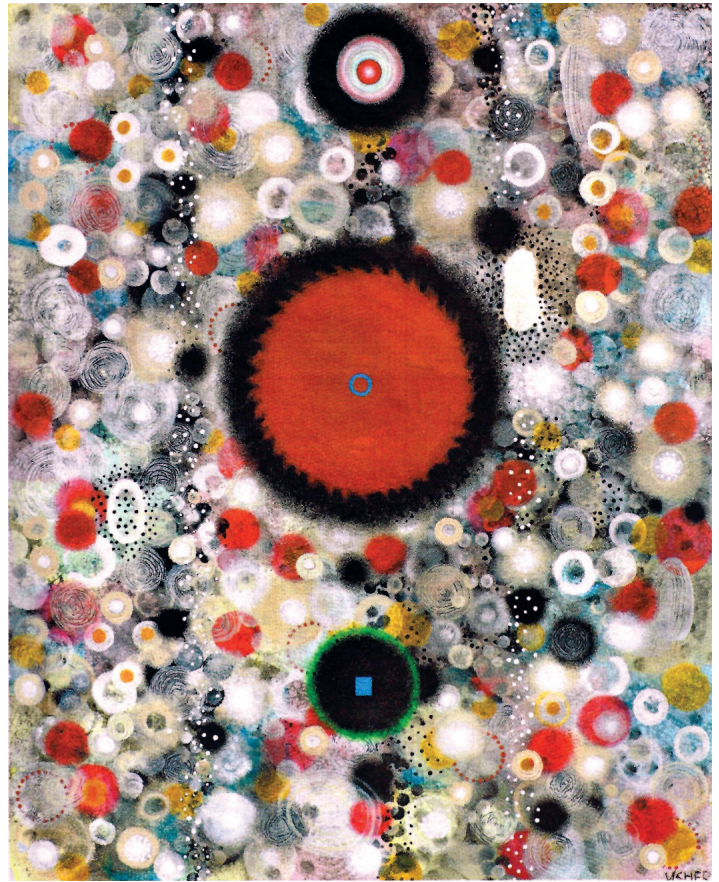
The reason why this happens is because creative art activity is exciting, challenging and exhilarating. The products of such emotional and expressive effort inevitably have the power to engage and exercise the heart, head and senses of a spectator.

The Exhibition Program was initially established at the airport in 1998. It was set up to make the environment in the terminal more attractive by offering a unique cultural presence to enhance the experience of the traveling public. To the present day, that purpose continues to be fulfilled.

Directed by Leah Douglas, the program is responsible for organizing and presenting rotating exhibitions of original art and other worthwhile offerings such as a collection of original posters designed to promote feature films that have been made in Philadelphia, and a display of American flags showing changes that have taken place across the years in the appearance of the Stars and Stripes.

At present, an example of exceptionally impressive artworks is installed in Terminal B. It is a solo exhibition of paintings by Donna Usher, an eminently distinguished professor of art at nearby West Chester State University. They are scheduled to remain on public view until the end of June 2011.

Like such great composers as Beethoven and Mozart, she gives voice to a mystical sense of both spiritual and emotional elevation. In a bright vocabulary of unexpected pattern and intense color, her forms articulate a rare state of infinite transcendence. Instead of offering snapshots describing obvious material objects seen in the ordinary, everyday world, she brings a universe of pure invention and balanced order into



Donna Usher, *Meditation - 29*.

being. The paintings she puts together add up to a reality with esthetic life of its own.

For example, *Meditation 57 - Drift*, is a lively arrangement of circular forms rendered with acrylic paint on aqua board. Spots and dots of red, yellow, blue and white shimmer radiantly in a chromatic ground of incredibly brilliant light. Starting by letting her imagination run free, the painting evolved as the artist worked on it. Gradually, the composition came to resolution as the parts comprising the whole merged into place beside each other. Ultimately, they all worked harmoniously, locking together as a superbly integrated whole.

Other striking pieces by Usher, also on exhibition at the airport, function brilliantly as joyful expressions, urging the pursuit of sublime states of meaning and purpose in the experience of life at large.

With art that clearly rivals the offerings one finds in most serious commercial galleries in downtown Center City, the selections installed at the Philadelphia International Airport are truly well worth a connoisseur's time and attention. ■

Dr. Burton Wasserman is a professor emeritus of Art at Rowan University, and a serious artist of long standing. Dr. Wasserman's program *Art From Near and Far* can be heard on WWFM in Central and Northern New Jersey and Bucks County and WGLS in South Jersey.