Innovative Broadway art project enters beta phase

High res photo-1 Artist Benjamin Hunt used Plexiglas for his work “Floating Cities,” which computer artist Sophia Scalice then turned into a 3-D model that will be visible with the special app.

High res photo-2 A test of the process: The dodo appears to be standing at a light-rail station but actually can be seen only through smart devices with the special app.

Broadway Augmented, an art project that explores augmented reality, is now in the final testing phase. Public artworks have been created for the sophisticated, high-tech undertaking – but only in the virtual world.

The project is a partnership of Sacramento State, the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission (SMAC), the Greater Broadway Partnership District and the Urban Land Institute.

No physical piece of art actually will be placed in the neighborhood between Interstate 5 and Highway 99, but by using a custom app created for the project, pedestrians will be able to see the sculptures, animations and videos on their smartphones and tablets, superimposed onto Broadway locations as if they really were there. The works even will appear in differing perspectives as the viewer walks around the site.

The unveiling is scheduled for the Sept. 13 Second Saturday arts celebration.

The alliance recruited 11 artists for the project, some of whom haven’t worked with augmented reality media before. They visited the neighborhood during the fall and winter, chose a site and created a piece for the particular environment.

The technical elements are being supervised by Sacramento State Professor Rachel Clarke, who also is one of the artists, and Geoffrey Alan Rhodes of the Art Institute of Chicago. This spring and summer, Clarke has led a 3-D modeling team composed of current and recently graduated Sac State students from her New Media Art program. First they created test artworks to demonstrate the project’s workings and to show the artists what to expect from a finished product. Test subjects have included a giant dodo standing in a light-rail station and a giant, colorful seashell in the window of a business.

“From this the artist could get a really strong sense of what the location looked like and what could be done at that location,” Clarke says.

In May, the students received the artists’ designs, and they are turning them into the digital models that will appear on the screens of viewers’ smart devices. “The computer
models are then sent to the artists, who provide input so that we can refine them,” Clarke says.

One of those works, “Floating Cities,” from local artist Benjamin Hunt, comprises a pair of unique paper lantern-inspired structures. Broadway has a strong Asian tradition, so Hunt is combining Asian design elements with vintage American home architecture from the greater Sacramento area to create paper lanterns that seemingly will “hang” from two buildings.

“It came full circle and made sense to make this lantern-inspired structure that takes the form of a house,” Hunt says. Each lantern has a “mirrored” twin attached to the bottom, creating a reflection of the upper house.

Hunt constructed a physical model from Plexiglas that then was translated into a 3-D computer model by Sophia Scalice, a senior who graduates in December.

She created the digital model, textured it and then worked with Hunt to create the second one, which did not exist in a physical form. Waiting for the computer to create the actual model from the information Scalice enters takes considerable time, but she has enjoyed being part of such an ambitious project. “It’s exciting, frustrating and fun at the same time,” she says.

“We are very excited about blending this new technology with one of Sacramento’s most historic districts,” says Teresa Roche, executive director of the Broadway Partnership.

“This project would not be possible without Rachel and her team working with the participating artists to translate their ideas to 3-D technology,” says Shelly Willis, executive director of the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission. “It is a very complicated process that requires a unique set of skills.”

Rhodes was here recently from Chicago and developed the augmented reality app. He worked with Clarke to place the works on Broadway and test every model in every location.

The Broadway Augmented team also includes Sac State Design Professor Gwen Amos and participating students who have designed a project website that, when launched, will include information on locations, related events, artists’ biographies and more.

At the same time the project is unveiled, Broadway Augmented will open a related exhibition at 2421 17th St., current office for the Sacramento Republic FC soccer team
and former home of Beatnik Studios. Broadway Augmented will establish a gallery in the building’s front area where people may download the app and get information about the project.

The participating artists are: Clarke (new media), Hunt (sculpture), Jose Carlos Casado (multimedia), Malcolm Cochran (sculpture and public art works), Michael Rees (sculpture and new media), Mark Emerson (paintings and works on paper), Chris Manzione (sculpture and augmented reality art), Joseph Delappe (new media), Sabrina Ratte (video), Gioia Fonda (mixed media) and Rebecca Krinke (multimedia, sculpture and installations).

The gallery exhibition at Sacramento Republic FC will feature work by artists Chris Daubert, Mark Lanning, Andrew Connelly and Emily Schleiner.

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