

Artist Laureate Program Report 2021

Submitted by Alexey Steele
January 18, 2022

The overarching philosophy and goal for my Artist Laureate tenure is to reinforce an understanding and perception of the critical importance of art for Culver City. All programs and initiatives of my tenure are designed with this goal in mind and are intended to serve this purpose in the most efficient and attainable way.

The 2021 program was built on the foundation that we collectively set in 2020.

Love My Neighbor Series

Two new LMN series portraits were created.

“**Rich**” sepia on Fabriano paper 30” x 22” – (Completed August 24, 27 & 28)

“**George**” sepia on Fabriano paper 30” x 22” – (Completed November 30, December 2 & 4)

The portrait drawings and the process of their creation had featured two different quiet heroes and Culver City neighbors as well as their remarkable stories.

- **Rich Yamashita** shared his vision of service to the community which included leading Cub Scout Culver Pack 79 for ten years. He also shared his personal family history with Japanese – American internment camps during WWII.
- **George Khan**, a noted Culver City musician and creative economy contributor, described his lifelong passion for art and how he was able to combine it with his business acumen and invest in community service and raising money for the homeless. He also spoke to our collaboration on the inspiring Singing Street project during the worst months of the pandemic in 2020, utilizing his artform as an instrument for critically needed emotional support.

Both portraits were created in a series of three distant-live sessions, the method I specifically designed for these times when social distancing is necessary. Two of the sessions in each set were conducted as Facebook live casts, open to the public and recorded; the recordings have been posted and are available for viewing.

My social media platform engagement just from the official Artist Laureate Alexey Steele page and my Instagram account are: 14,682 accounts reached with the total of 1,341 content interactions and engagements.

The personal stories of LMN Series will be included in the story bank project of the GPU reflecting the collective character of the city.

City Life

- I participated in the numerous **ERTF** meetings, including meetings pertaining to the Virtual Performance Center
- I was selected to serve on the **Arts and Culture Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) for the Culver City General Plan Update (GPU)**. In this capacity I participated in all meetings, communicating to the consultant – Cultural Planning Group -- my views on the position of arts in Culver City, including the importance of the arts to the city’s creative economy and brand. I am happy that these comments and recommendations are now reflected in the GPU recommendations. I also advocated in light of the inevitable decline of retail galleries for the creation of a visual arts center on City-owned property. The case study I provided is the Balashikha gallery established in the Moscow metropolitan region by my father, Leonid Mikhailovich Steele.
- I was invited by the **Culver City Neighbors** magazine to create a column for the Love My Neighbor project and I wrote the first story on Rich Yamashita. I will follow it with the story of George Kahn and subsequent LMN project participants.

Artworks

In addition to the two new portraits of Love My Neighbor series I have completed three new plein air paintings.

- **“El Marino Jacaranda”** (oil on linen board 20” x 16”) is painted at El Marino park and depicts jacaranda in full bloom.
- **“Gust and Glow”** (oil on linen board 30” x 40”) was exhibited at the “On Location in Malibu” exhibition at the Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University.
- **“Sierra Sunrise”** (oil on linen board 36” x 48”) was exhibited at the Gold Medal Show by the California Art Club at the Hilbert Museum of Art at Chapman University.

Ambassadorial Engagement

In early conversations with Dr. Janet Hoult about the outlines of the Artist Laureate Program we both shared the vision that international representation should be included, highlighting the importance of the arts and creativity in Culver City.

This is how I viewed and conducted my trip to Russia in the fall of 2021.

This trip was “official” for me because it was dedicated to a **centennial celebration of my father, Leonid Mikhailovich Steele**, a renowned and important Soviet artist, the founder and first director of **Balashikha Art Gallery**, the municipal state museum in the Moscow region.

This celebration of my father’s centennial by the institution that he founded carried a special meaning for me personally as well as for our whole family. My father was a passionate soul, a man of ideas, a man of the people, creative, and brimming with enthusiasm. He was able to rise and inspire people. All the events were spectacularly well-attended with lots of attention by city officials and residents. We are particularly happy that my father’s memory and his civic contributions are so alive in the hearts and minds of our hometown residents after all these decades. I have collaborated with the museum’s curatorial staff on this special exhibition and surrounding events.

I also consider particularly relevant for our contemporary world that my father’s concept of “municipality of art and culture”, which was part of the very foundation of his visionary initiative to organize Balashikha Art Gallery in 1978, the idea that received a vivid historic recognition throughout the forty three years of its active life as one of the most important and beloved cultural centers of the community, today is recognized as an innovative and forward looking idea in the international city planning, while Balashikha experience had become a case study that I developed for the Culver City GPU.

As part of the exhibition, the Department of Culture of Balashikha City District Administration organized a whole range of impressive large-scale community events which received wide coverage by the media, social media and television. This became one more example of the meaningful vitality of the gallery for the current generation of Balashikha residents. For me as an artist who continues the artistic and civic path of my father it was very important to meet the young artists and teachers of Balashikha’s schools of art representing a whopping eight fully specialized art schools with heavily subsidized affordable programs in art and music.

Also, it carried a special meaning for me to have an opportunity to present and share with the residents of my hometown the “Love My Neighbor” project as I executed the live portrait of a long-time local music teacher, the type of quiet hero to whom my series is dedicated. It was amazing to see the complete similarities of response and appreciation for this concept.

As a result of our creative meetings with the gallery staff and Culture Department of the Administration, of our collaborations on programs that accompanied the exhibition, we now have long term plans and opportunities of future collaborations:

- Conducting ongoing video conferences between Balashikha Art Gallery and my non-profit Artward Gallery in the City of Carson; and,
- Organizing video presentations of the art by the leading American realist artists in Balashikha and Russian and Balashikha artists in Los Angeles.

Another important part of my trip was the completely unexpected interest expressed by the public program art curators in Russia to the **public art concept** that I am developing. We had a series of high-level discussions.

As a result of those meetings, I came across another highly significant opportunity for Culver City.

The curators and consultant's group I am working with is strongly connected to a very high profile **Skolkovo** development project next to Moscow. Skolkovo is a signature project of the former Russian President Medvedev and is currently developed as the most progressive, western minded, high tech-oriented master planned community signifying the new Russia. The - nature of the city with its special business status makes it uniquely ideal for possibility of establishing relations with Culver City.

This concept was preliminarily very well received with recognition of possibility for a very positive reception by the Skolkovo civic and business leadership. I think it is entirely doable to initiate and develop the sister city relations between Culver City and Skolkovo and I will work with the Sister City Committee to see if a formal relationship can be forged. I think it would be of a sizable impact on the legacy of my tenure as well as on the future position of the AL Program within the city if we become originators and facilitators of such a relationship.

At the same time in support of the recovery effort I have developed with the Artward initiative non-profit, a **Love My Neighbor 2 Recover** kids art contest in the LA County neighbourhood of Scottsdale, Carson where the Love My Neighbor project originated.

Culver Arts Foundation

- I participated in board meetings
- Helped develop the program for the Culver Arts December 16 Resiliency Fund Event
- Held an exhibition of my recent artworks highlighting ALP at the December 16 event including works on paper from the LMN Series and two major recent paintings

- Donated a specially created original artwork "The Heart of Culver" (oil on linen board, 8" x 8") which was presented to Wally Marks from Culver Arts

In Development

I also continued my work on developing the innovative public art concept involving adaptation of new revolutionary construction and material as well as cross-disciplinary integration of media technology. I currently have a substantial interest in Russia in developing a pilot project at the internationally renowned experimental public art, architecture and land art hub in Nikola-Lenivets.