

Ladd Brothers mural for Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz stadium is a community effort

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Finding role models in any career can be challenging, but for the one percent of the workforce that self-defines as artists, it can seem almost impossible.

Growing up near St. Louis, Steven and William Ladd didn't think they could become artists. They had little access to the art world, but they did have a supportive family to encourage their dreams.

The artistic duo, currently known as the Ladd Brothers, has since taken their message of applying collaboration, focus and discipline to do the work you love to communities across the country. Last summer, they arrived in Atlanta's westside to engage 900 children and adults in what is one of their largest projects to date.

The Ladd Brothers were commissioned by SCAD to create a 38-foot permanent mural at the new Mercedes-Benz Stadium. The mural, composed of more than 10,000 beads mounted onto 150 custom panels, is one of the larger works of art that will be on display inside the sports arena.

CRISTINA GRAJALES GALLERY

“Steven and William Ladd are filled with light and love -- consummate artists who teach as they create. They weave their artistic practice into the communities they serve as brilliantly as in their intricate works of art. Their work is truly a joy to behold,” said SCAD President and Founder Paula Wallace.

The process of creating the mural began with a 20 page design brief from SCAD which included polls from Falcons fans about what they would like to see in the stadium. “Usually when you start with a client on a project like this, they don’t have all their stuff together,” said Steven Ladd. “SCAD and the stadium were so insanely prepared. It was amazing to have that kind of resource.”

The brothers first proposed a 175 foot mural based on the idea of the 12th man, the term used for fans of teams in sports games that have 11 players on the field, specifically football and soccer. But as soon as SCAD’s design team did a walk through of the space, they deemed the 175 foot wall unsuitable for museum quality art. The project began to evolve as the brothers worked with SCAD to refine their idea.

The Ladd Brothers had just completed a 40 x 40-foot mural in Brooklyn during which they had perfected the idea of a bead making process that incorporated the community. Beads are materials and symbols that are universally known and understood by people of all ages and they decided it would be a good fit for the stadium piece and a way to engage the local community.

“One thing Steve and I are excited about doing is working with communities that don’t have access to working artists,” said William Ladd. “Over the last 10 years we have been going into the community sharing with kids our values and communicating the idea of collaboration with them and making a collaborative piece after that is done.”

Their “Scrollathons” unfold over two weeks with four classes per day and involve hundreds of community members of all ages. In Atlanta, the brothers connected with the Boys & Girl’s Clubs through the Blank Foundation.

Sessions began with an introduction to the materials (trimming materials from an abandoned factory in Brooklyn), then the brothers shared a rendering of the mural and introduced the beads as the individual components that would make up the whole.

“The kids were interested, respectful and excited about being a part of something bigger than themselves,” said William Ladd. The children, mostly third graders and older, learned the process of making and painting beads. By the end of the Scrollathon, they had painted all the gold and white beads that will be featured in the stadium mural.

“When they go see this work of art, the beads they painted with be predominant and they will be able to take ownership of it,” said William Ladd. Each of the participants also signed a signature plate and were photographed for the project.

With the Scrollathon completed, the brothers shipped the materials home to New York where they began mounting the beads. They will return in June to meet with some of the children who helped with the project.

“The Ladd Brothers’ mural project is a very important and unique piece of the Mercedes-Benz Stadium Art Collection,” said Mike Egan, senior vice president, AMB Group. “This stadium will be the heart of Atlanta and representative of Atlanta’s culture and community so having kids from surrounding neighborhoods contribute in this way is very special.”

The \$1.5 billion retractable-roof stadium was first scheduled to open in March, but the date has been pushed back three times due to construction issues. The first event to take place at the stadium will be Aug. 26.

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When the stadium does open and the walkways are filled with spectators, the Ladd Brothers hope their work of art leaves a lasting impact.

“We hope they really walk away with the deepest and most personal connection to the work of art and the stadium, that they really feel a deeper sense of self,” said Steven Ladd.