

The Wall at WAM
Jim Hodges: *Don't be afraid*



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A mural project created in collaboration with members of the United Nations

April 2004 – July 2005

Over the past decade, Jim Hodges' aesthetic voice has matured and flourished, and in the process, he has made a truly invaluable contribution to the cultural community at large. He has done so by investing in art objects a renewed regard for such shared human experiences as pleasure, kindness, and wonder. Recognized for works of unadorned simplicity and metaphorical richness in a range of media, Hodges is also respected by peers, critics, collectors, and curators for his awareness to social and cultural conditions in the contemporary world.

Hodges' art—in any medium—typically explores big themes with the most unassuming materials and accessible methods. Although trained as a painter, today Hodges is recognized for his adeptness at working in a range of unconventional “sculptural” formats that incorporate photography, sheet music collage, mirror mosaics, and wall drawings. A partial list of the commonplace materials Hodges has employed includes paper napkins, silk scarves, glass, silver chain, and light bulbs. In his hands, mirrors become mosaics, artificial flower petals grow into curtains, and silver chains are woven into spider webs.

Hodges' ability to transform the ordinary into the visually poetic is coupled with his sensitivity to the transient moments and poignant bits and pieces of our lives. Frequently, Hodges' art generates for viewers/participants a process of locating oneself in the world, resulting in a sense of the individual integrated into the environment. A spirit of interconnectedness and interdependency is echoed formally in works that are constructed of separate but similar units (such as words, color chips, flowers, mirror tesserae, etc.). The titles of Hodges' works are also a source of poetry and signal a relation to the world beyond the object. Whether in the form of a delicate glass bird's nest (*A view from in here*), a Prismacolor pencil abstraction (*Happy/Sunrise-Sunset*), or a collaged hybrid of color, sound, and music (*Picturing that day*), Hodges genuinely celebrates incidental yet magical occurrences. As he has said, his works “attempt to talk about the bigness of things, the wonder and the greatness of all life.”¹

Grounded as they are in lived experiences, Hodges images and processes (not surprisingly) generate shared narratives about place, time, and relationships. Whether discrete objects or room-scaled installations, Hodges' art is always laced with powerful and accessible symbolism. It is because Hodges' art operates in the emotionally charged and culturally complex space between the private and the public that I invited him to create a mural for the *Wall at WAM*.

The *Wall at WAM*, a unique series of temporary projects, is sited on a second-story, 67-foot expanse in one of the Museum's most public settings—the Renaissance Court. Located in the very heart of a museum representing 50 centuries of world art and culture, the contemporary wall project can be encountered from a variety of vantage points, equally accessible to viewers in transit and those lingering to experience it at the balcony level overlooking the Court's 6th-century Roman mosaics. The project affords leading young artists from around the world unique opportunities and challenges posed by its monumental scale, ephemeral nature, and moving juxtaposition of past and present.



Jim Hodges writing “don't be afraid.” Photo credit Tim Hailand.



Hodges recalled visiting the Worcester Art Museum in fall 2002 and seeing the Renaissance Court with Julian Opie's monumental portrait for the *Wall at WAM*: "I was taken with the context and was instantly drawn to that space and ended up finding to my surprise that this contemporary work was existing in this context of ancient art. I loved that there was this instant folding or collapsing of space and that I was able to experience art of such diverse times and diverse media. And it was so touching for me to see that all that was communicated—this message, this instinct, this response, this expression—was a continuum."²

Don't be afraid, the sixth project commissioned for the Museum's *Wall at WAM* series, is uniquely collaborative and inclusive in nature. It began with Hodges' "desire to express in as many languages as possible the phrase, 'Don't be afraid.'"³ When he began thinking about how he would access a range of voices and the world's languages, Hodges, who lives and works in New York City, thought of the United Nations not only as a global community but also as his "neighbors." He invited delegates from member countries of the UN to create a mural with him and specifically asked them to write in their own handwriting and native language the phrase, "Don't be afraid." He envisioned the handwriting acting like drawing and the individual quality of penmanship, although anonymous, symbolically representing "the unique sound of each participant's 'voice.' It is my dream," Hodges wrote in a letter sent to UN members, "to create a 'global chorus,' with all languages represented, so that not one person entering the museum and experiencing the work will be excluded."

Set amidst the historic mosaics and within the context of human history as told by artists throughout time, Hodges' mural embodies his belief that the message of art can cross cultural and temporal barriers in uniquely meaningful ways. As he noted in his letter of invitation to the ambassadors, "Art and artists have often brought awareness to social and cultural conditions, sometimes reinforcing common held positions and at times opposing these conventions. Despite the specific content of art throughout the ages, one universal message has been expressed, that is, 'Don't be afraid.'"

Hodges first used this phrase in 2000 as the subject of an intimate three-dimensional drawing (about 10 inches high), spelled out vertically on cut paper, box-like forms. On that occasion its message was directed primarily at his own need, as an artist, for courage in the studio everyday. In his letter to UN members, he alluded to that personal meaning of the phrase by writing, "These words are somewhat the mantra of the artist and also the simple instructions the artist must follow to achieve new heights in his or her creative development." More recently, he used the phrase in a more public gesture—as



Don't be afraid, 2004, inkjet on vinyl, 17 x 67 feet, courtesy the artist and CRG Gallery.

a bumper sticker (in bold black type on a bright yellow ground), created as a multiple in conjunction with the catalogue accompanying the 2004 Whitney Biennial. His decision to return to the phrase for the Worcester wall project embraces meanings on many levels, from personal to global.

In practical terms, this was a project whose success depended on the good will and faith of many individuals who were willing to embark on a truly unique collaboration—between an individual artist, UN delegates from every corner of the world, and the staff of an art museum in central Massachusetts. This was not the first time Hodges gathered people from the public into his artistic process and incorporated their individual “marks” or “voices” into a collaborative wall project. For example, as part of his exhibitions at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art (1998) and the Miami Art Museum (1999), he invited school children to mark their heights and sign their names in the color of their choice on the wall of the museum. More recently, at the Addison Gallery of American Art (2003), Hodges worked with over 100 high school students to create a multi-colored mural and sound installation. In each case, the resulting artwork attests to the individual and the collective as mutually effective.



Don't be afraid, 2000, paper with acid free adhesive, 10" x 2" x 1", courtesy the artist and CRG Gallery.

In February 2004, the Museum sent 194 invitation packages to UN missions, with each including the following materials: a letter on Worcester Art Museum letterhead composed by Hodges introducing himself and the ideas for the project; color reproductions of several works by Hodges and previous *Wall at WAM* projects; a sheet of white 8.5 x 11" paper with an outlined template and the instructions “Please write ‘Don't be afraid’ in the space above using your native language”; a pre-addressed, stamped envelope for return to Hodges’ studio; and the Curator’s business card with her direct telephone number and e-mail address.⁴

Within a few weeks Hodges had received nearly 50 responses. At the Museum, we fielded a handful of telephone and e-mail inquiries with questions primarily asking if other nations were participating, if there was still time to participate, and whether anonymity would be guaranteed. Surprisingly, there were few, if any, questions about the intended message of Hodges’ art. A reminder notice sent in early March resulted in 20 more participants. Equally satisfying were the number of responses that were accompanied by warm notes of encouragement and support.

“Let me first of all congratulate you for your courage and innovative idea.”

“I wish this marvelous project be reached by the widest audience.”

“I would deem this proposal timely and worthwhile and I am therefore pleased to send you my handwritten contribution in Spanish ‘No tengas miedo’ to your special project, which I hope will meet with the success it deserves.”

“Great idea! Good luck!”

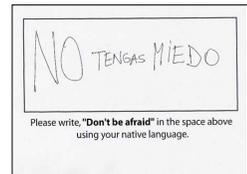
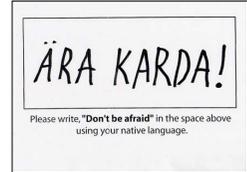
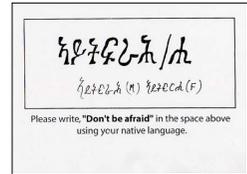
In addition to the multitude of languages and the unique quality of individuals’ handwriting—from graffiti-like to calligraphic—Hodges received several responses that offered him a choice between singular or plural and male or female forms. In one instance, an ambassador sent eight versions of the phrase allowing for subtle differences in form and translation (a short, “order” format “to persuade courage” or a longer one suggesting a “recommendation”). There was the occasional inclusion of an exclamation point for emphasis. And among the many responses in Spanish (most frequently written as “no tengas miedo”), the solitary interpretation as “no estoy asustado” (“I am not frightened”) further personalized the project. On only one occasion did Hodges receive the returned blank template and a letter formally refusing his invitation stating, “federal ethics regulations, however, prohibit the Ambassador from participating in this project.”⁵

Toward the end of March, Hodges scanned and combined the 69 texts he had received (two were received too late in the process to be included) and, remaining faithful to their color and scale, arranged them across a pale blue ground.⁶ The mural was commercially printed in 17 panels using technology for fabricating billboards. Once the panels arrived at the Museum, Chief Preparator, Patrick Brown, and professional wallpaper hanger, Bob Smith, oversaw the installation process.⁷

Now as one stands before the wall, entire cultures become visible in the shapes and sounds of three simple words. There is, on the part of many viewers, the desire to see if they can find their own language and a natural curiosity about which language belongs to which nation. Yet the intended anonymity of the participants coupled with the extraordinary variety of line and abstract composition keeps the finished mural in the realm of drawing rather than geo-political map.

That Hodges’ undertaking met with success during such a challenging 3-month period of world events should not, however, be minimized. After all, his invitation was extended in the midst of a US-led occupation of Iraq, terrorist bombing in Spain, and unprecedented debate about the credibility of the United Nations and its future as peacekeepers around the world. Created at a time when issues of isolationism and difference seem to threaten any sense of solidarity in the world (no matter what personal fears these three words might assuage), *Don’t be afraid* sends a welcome and universal message of inclusion, strength, and optimism. As Hodges told a Worcester audience, “...I don’t think it was a mistake to use the UN because it is a kind of world identity...we’re all sharing the same kind of space...whether you are an artist or whatever you do in your daily life, I think that for one to turn to someone and say, ‘don’t be afraid,’ is actually a loving kind of act. It was in that spirit that I sent the letters out.”⁸

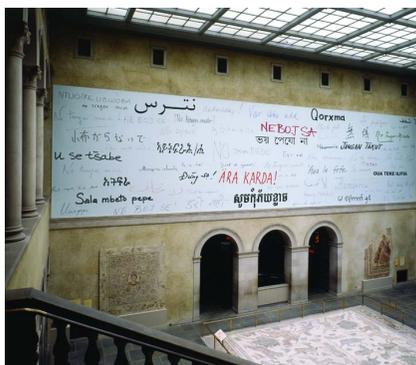
Susan L. Stoops
Curator of Contemporary Art



Sample templates with handwriting by UN members.

About the Artist

Jim Hodges was born in Spokane, Washington in 1957. He received a BFA from Fort Wright College, Spokane, in 1980 and a MFA from Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, in 1986. Numerous solo museum projects over the past decade include those at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, the Miami Art Museum, the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy in Andover, and the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs. He has participated regularly in group exhibitions around the world since 1988 including the Drawing Center in New York, the 1995 Venice Biennale, the 1996 São Paulo Bienal, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., Espai d'Art Contemporani de Castello in Spain, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, and the 2004 Whitney Biennial in New York. Hodges is represented in New York by CRG Gallery and in London by Stephen Friedman Gallery. He lives and works in New York City.



Don't be afraid, 2004, inkjet on vinyl, 17 x 67 feet, courtesy the artist and CRG Gallery.

Notes

1. Dana Self, *Jim Hodges: Welcome*, exhibition brochure for Kemper Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, 1998.
2. Artist's talk at the Worcester Art Museum, April 15, 2004.
3. Text of Hodges' letter to UN delegates, February 6, 2004.
4. Letters were sent to nations with "permanent mission" status as well as "permanent observer missions."
5. Letter received from the United States Mission to the UN. We do not know why other countries did not participate.
6. Seven participants cannot be identified by country because there was no letter or return address accompanying their handwritten text.
7. Because *Don't be afraid* exists as a digital file, Hodges envisions adapting it for multiple venues, formats, and scales.
8. Artist's talk at the Worcester Art Museum, April 15, 2004.

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Photo credit: Stephen Briggs