



Lee tourism dives head first into Chicago art scene

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Judy Ledgerwood's stay on Captiva Island in July inspired six paintings that have been translated into billboards being erected throughout her hometown of Chicago. Here's one of them (Photo: Special to news-press.com)

Chicago kicks off a big international art exposition today.

And, as residents commute to Expo Chicago or to their jobs, they're starting to notice wall-mounted billboards from the Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel that are, well, modern art.

They're based on the work of Judy Ledgerwood, award-winning contemporary painter from Chicago and a professor at Northwestern University.

Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau paid her travel expenses for a weeklong stay in July at the Captiva home of the late art great, Robert Rauschenberg.

That time was extremely productive: Ledgerwood created six huge paintings inspired by Southwest Florida's natural beauty.

"It's like making an enormous postcard and affixing it to these buildings," Ledgerwood said of the Expo translation of her work when interviewed for a visitor bureau video that's on YouTube.

Of her time in Southwest Florida, the artist said: "It's been an unexpected and incredibly rich experience. I'd come back in a heartbeat."

Chicago already is one of Lee County tourism's major feeder markets. According to survey-based research, the Windy City ranked first for visitors staying at paid lodgings here in 2013, with more than 122,200 spending time here.

Expo Chicago, the Sept. 18-21 exposition of international and modern art, is the perfect time to call attention to the month long Lee County ad campaign in the city, said Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director.

Altogether, the visitor bureau will spend \$200,000 on the promotion that includes eight massive "wallscape" billboards in downtown Chicago, in River North and the Gold Coast. An additional 56 big billboards will display Ledgerwood's Lee County-based work along major expressways.

The visitor bureau also is partying arty: Wednesday morning, it hosted a rooftop breakfast meet-and-greet with about 45 journalists from publications including Chicago Magazine, the Chicago Tribune, the Chicago Sun-Times, Woman's Day, Lucky, Brides and the UK edition of Conde Nast Traveler.

And tonight, it's a sponsor for a party on Navy Pier's Mystic Blue Cruise ship that could attract upwards of 500 art and cultural leaders.

"We're going to serve Wicked Rum from Cape Coral. And there will be Norman Love chocolates in the goodie bags," Pigott said.

Making a splash in Chicago before local tourism's busy winter season makes sense for at least two reasons, according to Pigott:

"First, we've got great air service from Chicago.

"Second, we're telling a different story. They know us for our great beaches and the environment. But we want to talk about the cultural assets, and how visitors to our destination are inspired."

To be sure, the art-infused ad campaign is niche marketing. "But that niche consists of well-educated, high-income folks," Pigott said, adding: "Now's the time to do it."

THE LEDGERWOOD FILE

See her paintings at: the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, the Milwaukee Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, among others.

Awards: Include The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation Award, an Artadia Award, a Tiffany Award in the Visual Arts, a National Endowment for the Arts Award and an Illinois Art Council Award.

Academia: Ledgerwood is a professor at Northwestern University in the Department of Art Theory and Practice. She earned a bachelor's degree in fine arts from the Art Academy of Cincinnati and a master's in fine arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.