

'Art for Public Places' Captured in Photos

By JOHN RUSSELL

It emerges from "Art for Public Places," an exhibition of photographs that can be seen through Sept. 15 at Lever House, 390 Park Avenue, that a great deal of good has been done to New York City by the Cultural Council Foundation Artists Project. In all, 175 works of public art have been created since January 1978 by artists working for the project. They include murals large and small, sculptures in a wide variety of mediums and large-scale photographs.

All five boroughs have benefited from the council's activity, which has been financed by the Federal jobs program under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. Sixty of the works are shown in photographs in the Lever House exhibition, of which Bill Lapham has been curator, and they suggest that the general level of the work is remarkably high: so much so, in fact, that we can only regret that the council's project, which came under the city's Department of Employment, is scheduled to end on Sept. 30.

The chosen sites were of many kinds, but they had it in common that if it were not for the council's project, they would probably not have had any art at all. There are some possible exceptions to this statement — the employees' cafeteria at the World Trade Center, for instance, and the New York Botanical Garden — but in general, the sites in question have connotations of sadness, sickness, old age or unwantedness. It is the role of art in such places to suggest that life may not be so bad after all; and on the whole — again with some possible exceptions — the artists have done very well.

This was not a beginners' project. The average age was the average age of professional artists anywhere, and the senior painter on the list was Herman Cherry, who worked for the Works Progress Administration's art program in the 1930's. (Mr. Cherry turned in a piece called "To Bring Color Into an Institutional Situation," which was the equivalent of a keynote address for the whole project.) There were artists like Ursula von Rydingsvard, who has a considerable avant-garde following, but, fundamentally this was a project in which there were no stars; all worked as equals.



Photograph of a mural by Herman Cherry in "Art for Public Places," at Lever House

There were some strikingly happy solutions to problems that cannot have been easy. For the Dyckman Center of the Human Resources Administration at 4660 Broadway, Robert Smith produced a painting called "Different Walks of Life," in which human diversity is vividly epitomized in terms of legs and feet. Hunt Slonem's menagerie of wild beasts, painted on the outside wall of the Ocean Primary School at 904 East 98th Street, Brooklyn, is an embellishment to the whole neighborhood.

Art Guerra's forest-and-pool mural for the Holy Name Men's Shelter at the

intersection of Bleecker and Elizabeth Streets evokes unspoiled nature in a part of town that can certainly do with it. In his sculpture for the Municipal Building at 1 Centre Street, Steve Linden has rehabilitated some very old linoleum to quite remarkable effect. At the New York Hall of Science in Flushing Meadow, Queens, Richard Nicksic's mural "Seven Disciplines of Science" rejuvenates the ancient tradition of the didactic panorama.

Not all the work is of this quality, but this observer suspects that, piece for

piece, these contributions to the gaiety of our city compare quite favorably with those paid for by the W.P.A. nearly 50 years ago. The Cultural Council Foundation Artists Project has demonstrably succeeded in its aim, which was that more people in this city should have art somewhere at hand and not have to cross town to see it. In doing so, it employed a total of 325 artists over the last 18 months. It gave work to those artists, and it will give pleasure in places where pleasure is in short supply. It is difficult to imagine that in this context the money could have been better spent.