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[Art of the Spirit](#) August 16, 2016

[Oakland Artist's Statement Piece on Homelessness](#)

This artwork is a reminder of the beauty of humanity that connects all of us, whether housed or not. A real standout in Schuyler's "Cophinus" were the words the artist chose to place on the cart's push-handle: "THANK YOU." Imagine these words facing a homeless person pushing the cart, every day.



"Cophinus" simultaneously offers a pragmatic glimpse at the survival strategies of homeless people, while also expressing aesthetic beauty — and thankfulness.

by Ariel J. Smythe

Local fine artist Aaron Schuyler has his eye on the issue of homelessness. While homelessness is a condition some may consider ugly, Schuyler offers his art piece "Cophinus," a part of the Disruptus exhibition at Oakland's Vessel Gallery, which debuted at last month's Art Murrur event, as a reminder of the beauty of humanity that connects all of us, whether housed or not.

"Cophinus" — defined as "a hamper or basket" — is beautiful to the eye and also beautiful to the heart and soul. Made largely of simple but quality pine with canvas, metal, water, propane, batteries, and found objects added to a standard metal shopping cart, the piece is functional.

The top of the box contains useable drawers that are sized to fit folded garments so that clean laundry might be neatly stored. It also contains a working, propane-fueled, cook top and a sink that is supplied with water pumped up from a gallon container in the cabinet underneath.

A hidden compartment offers help for one of the biggest problems of the homeless — having valuables stolen while one is asleep or otherwise engaged — and handily stows documents, identification, money and other important items. There is an attachment at the back of the piece which forms a one-person sleeping tent.

While viewers of the artwork may see its potential for practical use, Schuyler calls attention to the symbolism of the piece.

“Cophinus is an empty vessel,” Schuyler says in his statement about the art piece, “a container yet to be filled. The shopping cart is remade with simple pine wood and readily available materials and hand tools. It is not filled with belongings or intended to present a completely stocked, self-contained, survival system, but is an empty container to prompt questions of what belongings, memories, fears and dreams a person brings with them. Its unadorned exterior is a blank slate into which a person's life experiences can be laid.”



Local artist Aaron Schuyler's statement piece on homelessness is currently on display as part of the “Disruptus” exhibition at the Vessel Gallery in Oakland.

Lonnie Lee, Director of Vessel Gallery and exhibit curator, says, “Disruptus offers the willing, and the unwilling, an opportunity to react to a world of disruption in communities and individuals, and how our decisions, macro and micro, affect lives, livelihood, and the way we live.”

Lee chose St. Mary's Center, which offers many services to the homeless community in Oakland, as the beneficiary of proceeds of the sale of pieces in the Disruptus exhibition. St. Mary's Center has been helping the poor in West Oakland for many years, providing a preschool as well as assistance for homeless individuals ages 55 and older.

St. Mary's provides food, winter shelter, advocacy, and training to support self-sufficiency, together with love, care and a message of “we are family” that extends beyond staff and seniors to include volunteers and members of the community-at-large. This community thrives through being connected to a larger community of concern, which is made visible through the work of Schuyler and other artists included in this exhibit.

What was a real standout for many who saw Schuyler's “Cophinus” were the words the artist chose to place on the cart's push-handle: “THANK YOU.” Imagine these words facing a homeless person pushing the cart, every day.

To ponder that this expression would be made either to or by a homeless individual is revolutionary. “Thank you” — a simple expression of gratitude — seems to be lacking in our society today.

Sending out an expression of general gratitude to the world via an art piece such as “Cophinus” is an exciting idea. And considering Art Murmur might be viewed as a West Coast “mini” Art Basel, one cannot help but be impressed by the juxtaposition of focus upon the important social concern of homelessness with the purchasing decisions of the financially enabled, potentially philanthropic, art-collecting world. Yet again, we see the power of artists to speak change to — and into — the world.

“Cophinus” will again be featured at the upcoming Oakland First Friday Art Murmur event on August 5 and on view until August 27 at Vessel Gallery, 471 25th Street, Oakland. More information can be obtained by visiting www.vessel-gallery.com.

9 Share

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