

Joining Hands

CASE STUDY



Art and industry collaborate to commemorate an historic Black neighborhood and inspire community healing and progress toward racial equity.



Southeast side mural in rich shades of purple

Photo credit: Jerriko Winkleman/Polyvision

Polyvision, based in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, recently collaborated with Shane Allbritton and Norman Lee of RE:site, an art studio specializing in commemorative public artworks to create four eye-catching murals that now grace the worn concrete walls of the Detroit Avenue underpass in nearby Tulsa.

No strangers to Polyvision's digitally printed CeramicSteel, RE:site brought this exciting and socially significant project to Polyvision in the Spring of 2024. Based on past projects, RE:site was familiar with the material and knew it would withstand repeated exposure to the elements and extremes of weather, temperature and highway traffic. The mission was to fabricate 60 large-scale panels to create a series of four murals, each spanning 30 feet wide and framed in stainless steel. The team at Polyvision was enthusiastic to begin working on

this project to showcase the capabilities of the new digital printer residing at the Oklahoma plant site.

The series, titled *Joining Hands*, presents four colorful mosaic-style murals that project a future based on restorative justice for Tulsa's Greenwood district. Known as "Black Wall Street" in the early 20th century, this flourishing neighborhood covered more than 35 city blocks. This installation is part of a larger public art and awareness initiative in the city to pay tribute to Greenwood, whose homes, businesses and civic buildings were decimated by the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. The objective was to create a visual celebration of a thriving, resilient and united Greenwood community despite adversity, and the message delivered by the *Joining Hands* murals is one of healing, hope and strength in community.

Commissioned by the Oklahoma Arts Council via their Art in Public Places program and in partnership with the Oklahoma Department of Transportation, RE:site embarked on an extensive research effort. They worked closely with the Greenwood Cultural Center, the Greenwood Rising Museum, local historians and photographer and Tulsa native Stephanie Alecia Rose to source both historical and contemporary imagery used in the design of the murals. A part of the Pathway to Hope Public Art Trail, each mural is composed of historical photographs showing a thriving Greenwood both before the tragedy and after the rebuilding as well as contemporary moments. Each of the image fragments are joined together by an outline of gold, symbolizing the Japanese art of *kintsugi*.



Close up of the kintsugi effect on the Southwest wall
Photo credit: Jerico Winkleman/Polyvision



Example of kintsugi technique
Photo credit: licensed via Shutterstock

An ancient potter's technique, *kintsugi* joins broken pieces of pottery together, highlighting the repair with powdered gold as opposed to trying to conceal the damage. The idea is that a broken object that has been put back together has an authentic and valuable story that speaks to resilience. When viewed at arm's length, the photographs are legible, however, when viewed at a distance, each of the four murals feature a different composition of hands joined together showing solidarity between people of all races and backgrounds. Not only does the artwork title refer to the joining of hands, but also it evokes the mosaic metaphor of restoring or rejoining of the Greenwood community through many hands.

“The murals tell a story of resilience and celebration, portraying scenes of everyday life filled with love, laughter, and unity. They serve as a beacon of pride and a reminder that joy is an essential part of our history and future. We appreciate the work of RE:site and Polyvision in making this incredible artwork.”

Michelle Burdex,
Greenwood Cultural Center



Installing the orange mural on the Northeast side
Photo credit: Shane Allbritton/Re:site Studio

Public art is a unique form of storytelling that visually narrates the human experience and conveys a sense of place, articulating ideas and emotions through color, form, size, shape, location and even movement. The impression created by a public art installation can engage, educate, inspire, motivate, heal and create belonging within the community and beyond. Observers can take the time to absorb what the artwork reveals to them personally, enjoying moments of contemplation and reflection. Through compelling visual and poetic expression, *Joining Hands* creates that sense of place, inviting inter-generational conversation about the Tulsa

Race Massacre and the ongoing struggle for civil rights. Color, imagery, and composition unite to evoke wholeness, joy, and prosperity, projecting a bright and hopeful future where racial inequities have been eradicated. Author Pamela Jo Landi, exploring topics around public art related to landscape architecture and regional planning, notes that “Public art relates to city life in many deep ways, ways that call out to meaning, memory, social empowerment, the intangible and ever-present drive for human creativity that may or may not be immediately visible at street level.”¹

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As visual storytellers, we often need to express difficult histories through our artwork that honors the past and educates the public.”

Shane Allbritton

¹ <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/entities/publication/64a18012-c882-4825-af55-39c610bbfc76>

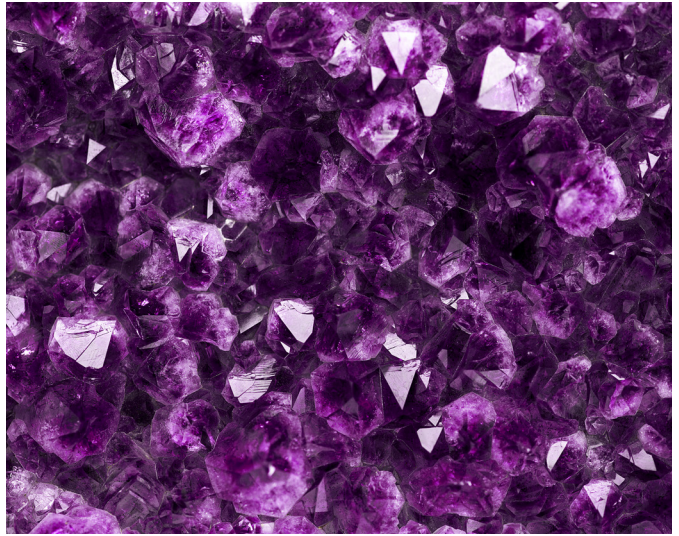


Photo credit: licensed via Shutterstock

One of the most striking features of the murals is the color chosen for each one. Color is one of the most important elements in the artist's toolbox along with line, form, and composition. Color can evoke a powerful emotional response and can be used effectively to communicate ideas or themes without words. If we take a moment to explore what this means, we learn that blue elicits calmness and serenity, encouraging inner reflection. It can inspire creativity and inspire productivity, which ties into the origins of Tulsa's bustling Greenwood business district. Green is symbolic of nature and reminds us that we are connected to the natural world. This refreshing color can stimulate growth, vitality and productivity while simultaneously providing a welcoming atmosphere, putting people at ease. Joyful, playful, and inviting are a few of

the sensations that are commonly associated with orange, like experiencing a beautiful sunset. Long recognized as a symbol of nobility and spirituality, purple also embodies wisdom, justice, peace, creativity, ambition and independence, relating to Greenwood residents' past and present qualities that resonate citywide. *Joining Hands* underscores public art's powerful ability to serve as a visual teaching tool, educating people about social or cultural topics that might be sensitive or controversial when viewed through the lens of history or traditional news media.

Custom printed CeramicSteel was the ideal product to convey the compelling and optimistic message embedded in the artwork. To print on CeramicSteel, the image in a digital file is deposited on the surface with specialized ceramic inks. Once dry, the image is permanently fused into the ceramic surface through a high-temperature furnace firing process. The result is a permanent image that will not fade or separate from the surface, providing decades of low-maintenance use. Although the digital printer is a new addition to Polyvision's stateside plant, digital and screen printed CeramicSteel has been fabricated in the Genk, Belgium plant for decades, withstanding the test of time in numerous train and metro stations and tunnels worldwide. These locations, as well as the location of the Tulsa murals, are subject to any number of potential environmental and human assaults such as abrasion and graffiti. The resilient porcelain surface resists these types of damage in addition to having bacteria, acid- and fire-resistant qualities that make it a superior choice for similar exterior structural applications.

For the project, Polyvision developed a special panel composition fabricated from aluminum and CeramicSteel. The goal was to provide a panel that was sturdy while also being as lightweight as possible so that they would fit easily and securely into the custom stainless steel framing system.



*Detroit Avenue underpass before mural installation.
Photo credit: Polyvision*

Shane Allbritton commends CeramicSteel's performance in a demanding environment: "Polyvision graphic panels are high-quality printed materials, and they were very straightforward to install in our minimal framing system despite very uneven underpass concrete walls." Although the Polyvision Okmulgee plant has been actively producing CeramicSteel for many years, this opportunity allows Polyvision to share the spotlight on this locally and culturally significant project, presenting the company's strengths and commitment to teamwork along with the addition of advanced ceramic digital print technology.



*Vivid and resonant blue hues shine on the Northwest side
Photo credit: Jerico Winkleman/Polyvision*



Vibrant green tones on the Southwest wall
Photo credit: Jerrico Winkelman/Polyvision

“Polyvision is honored to be selected by RE:site Studio to provide the graphic platform to make the artist’s vision a colorful and impactful reality in downtown Tulsa. This project is very special in that our materials are part of a positive social statement and are a source of local pride for the employees in our nearby manufacturing plant that produced the panels for the project.”

Kate Cathey,
Custom Product Manager at Polyvision

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