



INSTALLATION SENSATION

Artist and GFS educator Sarah Zwerling brings connectivity to the Comcast Centers with a digital photo collage that showcases the nature and neighborhoods of Philadelphia, bringing the outside in.

By Meg Cohen Ragas '85

SARAH ZWERLING IS EXHAUSTED. WHEN WE MEET IN LATE JUNE IN THE DINING CONCOURSE BENEATH

the Comcast Center to discuss her latest project, *Connection*—the digital photo collage that lights up the walls of the underground passageway that connects the original Comcast building to the new Comcast Technology Center—she is still recovering from the grueling 12-month process that produced the extraordinary, five-panel, 150-foot installation.

“I haven’t fully processed the enormity of the project,” shares the installation artist and digital printmaker, who has been a member of the GFS art department since 2014. “It was a little bit over the top. I didn’t sleep for a year.”

Connection is best described as a panoramic photomontage, printed on translucent film and mounted on giant LED lightboxes, that showcases the Philadelphia landscape on an idyllic spring day, and features city landmarks and neighborhoods, including the Walnut Street Bridge, South Philly, Fairmount, and Rittenhouse Square, along the way. Yet while it presents as one continuous photo, in reality, it is a collage of thousands of images stitched together into a seam-

less composition of bridges, landmark buildings, and rowhouses, against a gorgeous backdrop of blooming cherry blossom trees and blue skies.

“I don’t think of myself as a photographer,” Zwerling is quick to point out. “I’m not, not really. *Connection* is not really about the photos, it’s about creating this magical space. It’s about creating an experience, and that is not something you can capture in a single moment or photo.”

For *Connection*, Zwerling layered photo upon photo, connecting different scenes and neighborhoods through natural elements, such as the sky, tree canopies, and rocks on the riverbed, and man-made components like electrical and cable wires. “It’s all about connecting—the two Comcast buildings, the workflow, the commuters, the people, the city. I wanted to connect all of the buildings with the wires; I was thinking about Comcast and the communication that comes to all of our houses. Or how your tree limb interlocks with your neighbor’s. [*Connection*] creates so many different conversations around connectivity. Throughout the project, they called me The Connector, I felt like a superhero! I thought of other titles, but I just kept coming back to



Zwerling confesses that even after the project was finished, “I could have kept working on it.”

this one. I like my titles to be pretty simple and direct.”

Zwerling’s process, however, is anything but. To create the appearance of a continuous photo story, with everything in hyper-focus, she had to manipulate the images and play with perspectives. “When you take a photograph, what’s in front of you is in focus, but what’s in the background is not, it’s blurry.” But in *Connection*, everything is in focus—the tree in front and the five trees behind it. This is the result of photographing isolated trees, cutting precisely around each and every limb and bloom, then layering the cut-outs in the photographs.

“I wanted it to feel like you’re walking through the city. The bridge on one side of the river is just as clear as the other side. Everything feels like it’s in focus when you’re immersed in it.”

It’s this vision, coupled with Zwerling’s ability to “open up a space with her work,” that initially attracted the attention of Claudia Vick ’94, a partner in the New York-based Vick Art Advisors, who was hired by Comcast to curate the art collection for the new Comcast Technology Center. Chief Executive Officer Brian Roberts wanted the project to be Philadelphia-focused, featuring artists with a connection to the city, to showcase its rich history in the arts, industry, and maker culture. Vick’s firm had assembled the art collection for the first Comcast building, and already had a strong rapport with Roberts and his team.

“We did a tremendous amount of research to find a really wonderful group of artists who could produce things specifically for the building,” explains Vick, who runs the company with her mother Connie Vick. “We cast a very wide net. Our collection includes furniture makers, sculptors, lighting and textile designers; everything was custom made for the

space. We put a lot of time, effort, and thought into what went into the building and the artists who were selected, and how their work was [in relation to] the architecture.” In addition to Zwerling’s *Connection*, the Comcast Technology Center’s permanent collection includes pieces by

collage printed on clear vinyl that lines a terminal passageway at the Philadelphia International Airport. *Hamilton Street* features the houses on Zwerling’s street in West Philly, and she “altered the placement, scale, and color of the trees and birds to animate the scene and create an

“*Connection* is not really about the photos, it’s about creating a magical space, an experience,” says Zwerling.

several other artists and designers affiliated with GFS: the hand-rusted aluminum *Xfinity Sculpture* created by Adam Kamens ’89’s Amuneal; the Inkjet-printed mural designed by Shira Walinsky ’90; *Emotional Gradient* by current parent and fine artist and photographer Karen Harmelin; hardwood tables designed by current parent Tyler Hays’ BDDW.

When Vick contacted Zwerling about the Comcast project, she was already familiar with Zwerling’s 2009 installation, *Hamilton Street*, a digital

entrance to a more imagined place.” Based on *Hamilton Street*, Vick knew Zwerling could handle the size and scope of work the Comcast project required. “[Sarah] really knows how to address scale in her work, which I think is really unique. That [Comcast] hallway is big and hundreds of feet long, and she just knows how to work with that scale. That gave us a great amount of comfort when it came to putting her on the short list.”

Before Zwerling was awarded the commission, she went through mul-

“Every leaf, every branch, every wire had to be cut out,” says Zwerling of her photo-collage process; the finished work took weeks to install.





Connection
Sarah Zwerling
2018

The entrance to Zwerling's installation feels like a light-filled tunnel inviting you to experience a jewel-box-of-a-surprise inside.

tiple rounds of presentations over the course of five months, sharing three different sketches for possible concepts for the Comcast tunnel, each playing with the idea of bringing the outside and the city indoors—what Vick responded to in Zwerling's airport installation.

"I had to go through showing Claudia and the architects a series of more detailed imagery," she explains. "At first it was sort of like, 'This is my idea. It's like a walk through the city and you're seeing details of the architecture, details of color.' Then I talked about how, as you move through the tunnel from the old building, which is warm, to the new one, which is glassy and cool, the color shifts and changes."

When Zwerling finally received the go-ahead in February 2018, she had to wait for spring—and for the trees to bloom—before beginning the photographic process. In order to add more green to her palette, she scouted various locations, including the GFS campus, to find trees in bloom, representative of the Philadelphia landscape, that she could shoot in isolation. She changed her daily routine,

waking up at 5 a.m. each morning to work on sketches that captured the overall feeling of the concept, and devoted her weekends to exploring all corners of the city, taking photographs. By summer, she had the concept nailed down, what each panel would represent, and a photo library of hundreds of trees and buildings.

During spring and summer of 2018, Zwerling recruited some GFS students and recent alumni to help her cut out each of the elements that went into the collage. "Every leaf, every branch, every wire in the city, everything had to be cut out individually," she says. While they worked on the cutouts, Zwerling focused on the composition and layout, cleaning up all of the "sharp" edges and making sure that the panels, when collaged together, looked like one perfect springtime day. It was a Herculean task. "It took me 20 minutes just to open one of the files to work on. The biggest panel, 65 feet long, when I scaled it up to actual size, I could only see one or two details at a time. That was something I had to get used to," says Zwerling.

"Sarah did a wonderful job iden-

tifying the perfect elements to incorporate throughout the space so that it looks beautiful, but then you might say, 'I know where that bridge is!' or 'Those houses are so familiar to me!' You might not know the specific street, but it feels like Philly hitting you over the head," says Vick.

On the day Zwerling and I tour the installation, one of the security guards approaches her and says, 'I want to show you something,' and proceeds to point out the smallest little details that he likes to look at when he passes through *Connection*.

"That's what I wanted," Zwerling says, "for people to walk through and notice something different every time like you would on a regular walk. I didn't want it to be about the collage. I really love that people think I happened to find a day where everything was in bloom. They actually think it's a real photograph, not 300 different images in one panel, and that's what I was hoping for. It's all about the experience."

Would Zwerling do a project of this scale again?

"I don't know. Ask me in a couple of years."



LIGHTING

the Way

Last spring, the School Committee and Head of School Dana Weeks launched the GFS strategic vision *Lighting the Way*, a framework to steward the future of GFS, advancing our role in education innovation, equity, and access.

By Sam Rhoads '82, clerk of the GFS School Committee, and David Feldman '76, assistant clerk of the GFS School Committee

OUR CORE BELIEF THAT THE VOICES OF MANY ARE GREATER THAN THAT OF ANY INDIVIDUAL IS AT THE HEART of our strategic vision. This practice of shared wisdom inspired our approach and priorities.

Following a two-year journey of reflection and discovery that challenged the GFS community to imagine our future in a changing world, the School Committee explored the ideas shared by students, families, faculty, staff, and neighbors, while considering economic drivers, the local context, and the broader education landscape. School Com-

mittee working groups, including Strategic Financial Planning, Community Engagement, Stewardship and Sustainability, and Campus Master Plan, collaborated with a faculty-led committee on program innovation to turn our community's feedback into a set of interconnected priorities and goals.

The outcome—*Lighting the Way*—affirms and renews the school's commitment to its core values and Quaker philosophy, while providing a framework for GFS to advance as a leader in educational innovation, equity, and access. With a nearly

two-centuries-old history of providing academic excellence rooted in lessons of stewardship, our vision maps our longtime mission and the traditions we hold dear to the current priorities of our students, extending to learners beyond our campus.

Our vision is comprised of a vision statement, guiding principles, and four priorities: Mission-Driven Program, Learning in Community, Strength and Stewardship, and Responsible Impact. Our campus master plan, a core element of Responsible Impact, outlines exciting upgrades to our facilities that support