



Villager photo by Abby Luby

Jim Power at Astor Place, beside one of his 80 mosaic-tiled lampposts.

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Hope for Jim Power's public works

By Abby Luby

'There's nothing quite like being on the streets of the East Village with art purveyor and Mosaic Man Jim Power. Every five minutes he is stopped by someone who wants to know how he is and what he's up to.

“Hey Jim, when are you going to finish that lamppost across the street?” one man calls out while crossing Second Avenue.

“I’m on it,” Power sings back.

Power, 60, has been morphing ordinary street surfaces into lively sidewalk art with his intricate, ornate mosaics for the last 20 years. Dull gray lampposts, plain planters and bland bus benches became Power’s canvases for his energetic mosaics depicting New York as “our town” with tributes to the people who work here.

“There’s a good lamppost down on Broadway, you can walk around it and just below eye level you’ve got an entire tour of New York,” says Power. “It’s got sheep walking down Wall Street, the Empire State Building and the Brooklyn Bridge.”

The wildly colorful, jagged-edged mosaics are cleverly infused with a vibrating primitivism that unifies Power’s public works. A myriad of ceramic squares and slivered tiles, angular pieces of broken plates and a plethora of found objects make up Power’s palette. A typical light pole has more than a thousand tiles; the eight-foot pole at Eighth Street and Broadway has more than 2,800, with two small plates stacked on top of one another to form the number 8. A tribute on another pole is to emergency service workers during the 2003 blackout, another highlights the old Yiddish theaters, the Bowery Boys, Burns and Allen, Charlie Parker.

The 80 mosaic lampposts comprise the now infamous “Mosaic Trail” and span the Lower East Side running from Broadway down Eighth Street to Avenue A, to Fourth Street and then back to Eighth Street. The trail has been recognized in East Village guidebooks about New York City and in “AMTRAK by RAIL,” which shows the mosaics as a top tourist attraction. One of Power’s poles is also the end page photograph in the book “The Fighting Ninth” by Andrew Beirne.

Recently, Power gave up his vigilant post at Astor Place where he worked and slept to move to East Williamsburg. He was driven to seek shelter after he got beat up one night not too far from Astor Place.

“I thought I’d better get a roof over my head and a place for my dog, Jesse Jane. She loves it over there because it’s a basement apartment with a backyard to run around in.”

When Power moved it was rumored that he abandoned the East Village permanently. But the artist is adamant about keeping a constant presence where his art is.

“I’ve given my life to this. I’m too old to start a family or do anything else with my life so I have to see this through.”

As we walk the “Mosaic Trail,” a cold wind whips around Power, who, despite an unreliable hip, walks briskly, holding a cane in one hand and Jesse Jane’s leash in the other. Stopping at one lamppost he nudges it gently and watches it wobble back and

forth. “It’s been this way for four years,” Powers says shaking his head. “It’s got to be fixed.”

Fixing and maintaining his lampposts and planters was part of Power’s daily routine for the past two decades as a street artist. But the effort has now become too much for him to do alone. Over the years he has patched up holes at the base of lampposts, replaced thousands of tiny ceramic pieces and buttressed up some of the lamppost bases with extra concrete.

Power is incensed that the city won’t help with the upkeep of his work, and wonders why, after all these years, the politicians won’t acknowledge him or the legendary trail.

“I deliberately came out here and marked this trail as part of this creative American art colony and it goes unnoticed,” Power laments. “The majority of what goes on in this neighborhood all centers on its creative resources.”

But the artist community so integral to Power’s inspiration does indeed recognize his indelible and personal stamp on the East Village. Coming to his aid is Bowery Arts and Science, Ltd., Bob Holman’s non-profit group that will help Power raise funds to repair and create more poles. B.A.S. has linked up with the “Empower Jim Power” (empowerjimpower.com) initiative and has given Power new hope. A tour on Nov. 17 of his Mosaic Trail raised \$100, and donations are coming in online as well.

“I’d like to raise about \$200,000 for a two-year project,” he says. “That would give me enough for four people to work for \$30 an hour to complete the trail and put up some new poles.”

Power is also running a mosaic art project at P.S. 40 in Gramercy that will begin next year. “This is for students and their parents — it will tie the school together with the whole community.”

The Mosaic Man also ponders more city-based projects.

“I’d like to get tiles from each different county and tile lampposts all the way up Sixth Avenue, dedicating one post to one country using their tiles.”

Standing next to one of his poles on Broadway, he quotes from an old Stan Mack comic strip: “I’m trying to take the anxiety out of the city with beauty.” He adds, “I’m actually doing that now.”