

Art work addresses fear in scores of languages

— By Carl Hartman

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Braving summer showers, billboard workers mounted a 70-by-35-foot artwork on the curved facade of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum on the Mall yesterday, its message encouraging passers-by: "Don't be afraid."

The work, "Directions -- Jim Hodges," consists of the three-word saying, written over and over by delegates to the United Nations in their own languages. The Hirshhorn staff lists 85 inscriptions, two of them in what it calls unidentified "mystery languages."

The "global chorus," as Mr. Hodges calls it, expresses "a reassuring phrase in response to an unspecified distress, allowing viewers to develop interpretations of its meaning that might range from the personal to political," the museum says on its Web site (hirshhorn.si.edu).

Weather damage won't matter much, curator Kristen Hileman said. The Hirshhorn owns a digital program from which Mr. Hodges' work can be reproduced at any time.

"We'll see what it looks like in the fall," Miss Hileman said.

Miss Hileman said Mr. Hodges had not written any of the inscriptions himself but had determined their size and positioning.

"Employing techniques associated with crafts and materials such as artificial flowers, scarves, napkins and tissue paper to blur distinctions between high and low art, he creates sculptural works that emphasize the beauty of basic objects, ideas and emotions," the museum explained in a folder for distribution to visitors.

Asked about the possibility that the rare and unidentified languages might conceal words different from those Mr. Hodges requested, Miss Hileman replied, "It'll be interesting to see what people say about them."

Different versions of such messages conceived by Mr. Hodges have appeared in London, Miami, Chicago, Worcester, Mass., and Santiago de Compostela in Spain.