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### Sense of Omaha Within a Painting

The Omaha Mural Project for artist Meg Saligman began with interviewing hundreds of people and taking thousands of photographs during three separate research visits. She came to Omaha with no preconceived notions of what the mural might look like.

“As an artist I always let the content come from the site,” Saligman said. “The Kiewit Foundation had specific things they wanted said about Omaha and its history, and that it be relevant to the people.”

Saligman believes “Fertile Ground” represents Omaha as a place with potential and depth, the depth of landscape, and the depth of people.

Omaha’s story is not told in a chronological timeline from left to right on the Energy Systems building but from back to front.

“The only thing that runs from left to right is a yellow ribbon which signifies ties to the community,” Saligman said.

“In the background of the mural are the historical figures and as you come forward you see the contemporary figures, which represent the depth of the people and the history of Omaha,” she said. “The central figure of the mural represents potential because it seems that the time is now for Omaha and anything is possible here.”

Sandy Aquila, owner of the Omaha Healing Arts Center at 1216 Howard St., is that central figure.

October 8, 2008

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“She represents potential and a city moving forward,” Saligman said.

Through Aquilla’s enormous smile and laughter she could barely get the words out when asked how she felt about being part of the mural.

“I am so honored to be a part of it,” Aquilla said. “It’s such a tremendous privilege to represent the city.”

All the characters in the mural are from Omaha.

“The people she (Saligman) chose were not chosen because of who they are but about what they represent to the city of Omaha,” said Community Arts Program Manager for the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Holly McAdams. “The mural is a good marker for the cultural growth of Omaha.”

The characters represent different factions of the community and of different times.

“Some of the people were chosen because they are from different neighborhoods,” Saligman explained as she described the numerous characters represented.

The first character looking from left to right is Peter Kiewit, whose foundation is funding the project. “This is a nod to him as a person and to the philanthropy in Omaha,” she added.

Above him is the College World Series statue which represents the history of the CWS. To the right of Kiewit is a contemporary young woman representing downtown because she works downtown. Next to her are dancers from Creighton University. The photographer who took all the photographs for the project represents Omaha’s artists. A Native American woman is symbolic of the people who were first here in the region. The steam engine and buffalo in the background represents Omaha’s history.

Some of the characters are specific to who they are. For example, Preston Love is shown playing the clarinet to represent Omaha’s blues and the rich history and culture of north Omaha. A dancer that is actually a compilation of a number of figures represents the potential in Omaha and the O’Mally family signifies the importance of family. An Air Force officer is a reminder to what Offutt Air Force Base has meant to the community and three women pictured together

represent the spirit of Omaha.

For the O'Mally family, following the mural's progress has become an every Sunday event.

"We have talked about the mural as a family quite a bit," Mike O'Mally said. "We go down every Sunday after church to look at it and I've tried to explain the importance of it to my sons. I tell my sons that when they are older they can take their wives and kids down there and say, 'There I am when I was 5 and 7.' As they get older they will begin to appreciate the importance of it and what it's about. Omaha is about family, and family values are strong in the community and so for us to represent the family aspect is quite an honor and a privilege."

The unfinished portion of the mural will represent the building of a community. Saligman said that "figures yet to be completed will be shown planting and sowing representing our agricultural history and characters representing the city's architecture will also be added."

All the characters are seen walking on prairie grass to represent the community's roots, and an oak tree symbolizes its growth. Everything in the landscaping is indigenous to the area.

Saligman is very happy with how the project has progressed. "In all aspects the experience has been everything I thought it would be. I have never done a painting like this."

"When people here see images of my other work they say, 'WOW, they are crowded, or there are a lot of people. In Omaha there is a lot of open space, room to move, room to grow, and fertile ground.'"

Convergence is another theme Saligman sees in the project.

"A lot of things converge here which is why birds and buffaloes were chosen. Telecommunications wires will be shown underneath the ground and Stratcom will also be represented. Rivers also converge here. A lot of the symbols are about how things converge, which is big part of the mural."

When finished there will be 50 figures represented in the mural.

The project is also being closely tracked as a "best

practice" study that will influence how murals are looked at, mural technology and how older murals may best be preserved and restored.

"Acrylic murals have not been around for very long," she said. "This project will help with the restoration of other mural projects across the country. Most begin to fade after five years, but this one should last 25 to 30 years. The techniques being used for this project are being documented for future mural projects."

The project is being documented by the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center, the Rescue Public Murals project of Heritage Preservation in Washington, D.C., and the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation.

"This is important because it's going to benefit public art all over the world," McAdams said. "It shows here in Omaha that we can make great things happen."

Painting will stop at the end of October for the winter and is scheduled for completion in Spring of 2009.

To follow the mural's progress, Meg Saligman's blog is available at <http://megsaligman.com/blog/?cat=3>. The mural is located on the eastern wall of the Energy Systems Inc. building located on 13th and Webster streets. For more information please visit [www.omahamuralproject.org](http://www.omahamuralproject.org) or [www.bemiscenter.org](http://www.bemiscenter.org).

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