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Time for giant mural to shine

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Ernesto Guerra with Lanoha Nurseries moves some fertile ground under the "Fertile Ground" mural.

Artist Meg Saligman and her assistants were sweating to finish their giant downtown mural.

"Fertile Ground," the monumental public painting on the east side of the Energy Systems Inc. building near 13th and Cass Streets, will receive its dedication and formal lighting on Wednesday night. Saligman and her crew were working feverishly last week to complete the work on time.

"We are now entering the hell phase of this project," she said then.

As Saligman — an internationally renowned, Philadelphia-based muralist — and her five assistant painters applied the finishing touches to the enormous mural last week, the temperature soared.

James Shuster, a member of Saligman's Philadelphia crew, was feeling the heat.

"It seems like it's a hundred degrees out here," said Shuster as he sipped some of the water Saligman had passed around.

The 22,000-square-foot mural depicts people, places and landscapes from Omaha's past and present. The Peter Kiewit Foundation commissioned the project to foster a sense of civic pride in the city's downtown, said Lyn Wallin Ziegenbein, executive director of the foundation. The result is the largest privately funded outdoor public mural in the country.

"We funded it with the hope that it becomes a place of pride for Omaha," Ziegenbein said.

Saligman and a team of 10 assistant artists used 871 gallons of paint and 600 brushes on the work, which took more than 11,000 hours to complete. More than 75 volunteer artists and students from Bellevue University also contributed.

Work began last June and stretched into November, when cold weather brought the first phase of the project to a halt. Saligman and her crew returned to complete the mural in early May. At that time, about 95 percent of the work was complete. Saligman and her team returned to work on the fine details.

They checked for air bubbles that may have been left behind after the first round of painting. They also added a continuation of the mural on the Energy System building's north wall.

"The mural seemed incomplete," Saligman said. "We thought it needed to continue on the north with an extra flourish."

The entire mural was also pressure sprayed last week with a coating that should help preserve it for about 25 to 30 years. Starting

Wednesday evening, the mural will be bathed in a soft white light.

"It's going to create a beautiful glow in the evenings," Saligman said.

In all, 46 people from Omaha's past and present are depicted in the mural. For Saligman, finding those subjects was hard work.

After receiving her commission two years ago, she spent 10 months planning and four months researching the project.

She visited photo and historical archives at the Durham Museum, the Douglas County Historical Society, the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center and other places.

She also took about 2,000 pictures of about 100 contemporary Omahans. The best were used along with the archival photos to create a 70-foot tall by 328-foot long tribute to the city.

Some of the people depicted in the mural are real people from the past and present. Others are composites.

"The exact identity of the people in the mural isn't the most important thing," Saligman said. "It's what each individual represents to the community that is important."

That said, the mural does show some readily identifiable people.

The white-haired man on the far left side of the mural is Peter Kiewit, who, according to Ziegenbein, represents Omaha's past along with its community of senior citizens.

Standing next to Kiewit — and representing Omaha's present and youth — is a likeness of Hallie Sharkey, who works just around the corner from the mural at Film Streams.

The figure dominating the center of the mural is a striking, red-haired dancer. She's standing on her toes and reaching for the sky. Her pose makes her a symbol of Omaha's future and potential.

The dancer is a composite figure. However, Holly McAdams, who worked on the project as the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts' program manager, did serve as a model.

"That's not really my head," McAdams said. "But the rest of the dancer is definitely me."

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