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Fertile Ground Blooming



International muralist embodies heartland spirit

by Sally Deskins

The root of the second largest mural in the United States — now about halfway complete in downtown Omaha — is the authenticity of the unseen. Artist Meg Saligman has found a genuine quality in the region's arts community through the project's ever-expanding band of players: professional painters, the bartender who works next door to the mural site, a group of Bellevue University students. These contributors and anyone who stops by just to "yak" are what keeps the project rolling.

"What I will think of most when looking at the finished mural is the friendships and connections made throughout the process," said Omaha artist Ismael Linares, a project contributor.

Saligman continues to paint the huge piece on the side of the Energy Systems Building on 13th and Webster. She designed the mural specifically for Omaha, aiming to capture the past, present and future peoples, natural landscapes and values that make the city what it is.

Linares hooked up with Saligman and the project through his ex-girlfriend Margine, who is featured in the mural. When Margine was being photographed at the Bemis Center earlier this year for the mural, she used her cell phone to show Saligman photos of Linares' paintings. Saligman was impressed.

"He's extremely talented," Saligman said, pointing to a Linares sketch on the wall of the crew's studio in the Energy System's building. Saligman said by the time the crew completes *Fertile Ground* next October, she



hopes to have Linares, the only crew member from Omaha, started on a new solo mural project in the area.

This flow of close connections is what muraling is about. Saligman, whose bright and community spirited murals are known worldwide for their theatrical presence and grace, constantly passed the credit for the work around the room. Her crew does the same. The crew members one afternoon, clothed in paint-spattered garb, included Linares and muralists Efrain Herrera and Ella Yates and photographer and general assistant Terry Gilvon of Davis Erection (who is also featured on the mural), spoke endlessly of their appreciation for the experience of working with Saligman.

Even community members have participated in the process, including students from a Bellevue University mural painting class, taught by muralist Miguel Giroux. Giroux said he heard about the project "through the artist grapevine," and approached Saligman to include his class, and she obliged.

Students Valerie Eich, Ralph Amachree, Ariadna Mota, Maria Correa and Charlene Potter, who devoted much more than their nine required hours to the project, helped paint using Saligman's own "paint-by-numbers" muraling technique, where she draws a figure on fabric and pencils in numbers of colors to be painted. Saligman said she developed this technique when assigned a mural in Shreveport, Louisiana and worked with more than 2,000 community volunteers.

Finding the right paint means shuffling through thousands of shades, donated by Sherwin Williams for the Omaha Project. The cans and mix swatches are scattered about the crew's studio, along with a stereo the team says they have "battles of the bands" over, drawings of the mural plans and large drawings of figures that still need to be painted and placed.

Outside, video cameras from Davis Erection record the process, to be exhibited in some form at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art within the next year, said Bemis Director Mark Masuoka. Along with the mural, Bemis will incorporate the project in educational programming, including conservation and preservation of the project with help from the Ford Foundation, documentation of the project and general conversation about what the mural means to the community.

Even the bartenders at the Mattress Factory next door are "formally" a part of their crew, since they frequent nightly, contributing to their self-described "workaholism."

"Everyone brings what they can to the project," Saligman said, noting textile specialist Charlene Potter in the Bellevue University class, who took home and cut dozens of pieces of fabric on her sewing table, a job that would have taken the crew days to complete.

Saligman's favorite part of the muraling process includes the simple moments of painting, with the wind in her hair and the sun on her back. But, she says, she will always remember the people and kindness of Omaha, especially the support of the Bemis Center and Peter Kiewit Foundation, as well as the conservation aid from the Ford Foundation, and, she adds, anyone else stopping by "to yak."

"People are always passing by, yelling out 'hello' to us working, showing their support," Herrera said, walking toward his current task of painting the toes of the central figure, reminiscent of the style of Maxfield Parish.

It is a woman gracefully floating in the sky. He adds quickly: "Hey, can you paint? Why don't you come by and paint?"

For more information about Fertile Ground or Meg Saligman, go to megsaligman.com or bemiscenter.org.

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