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08/21/2008

Metro area's largest mural slowly takes shape

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OMAHA - A short distance from the Interstate 480 bridge, a massive work of art unfolds, paint stroke by paint stroke. "Fertile Ground," a 70-foot tall and 328-foot long mural painted by internationally acclaimed artist Meg Saligman, will be the third largest mural in the United States when it is finished. The size is impressive enough, but up close, the detail of carefully mixed color and texture is incredible.

And it's only minutes from Council Bluffs.

"Fertile Ground" is strictly the story of Omaha, but it's no less worthy a drive by to view its progress. On the east wall of the Energy Systems building near 13th and Webster streets, the largest public art project in the history of the area is forming. The Peter Kiewit Foundation commissioned it as a gift to Omaha, but because of its incredible beauty, it's a gift to all who view it.

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Saligman was told that in Omaha people meet your gaze.

When she picked up her rental car at the airport, she noticed it right away. At first, the artist thought she might have had some paint on her forehead. Why else is this clerk looking at her that way, she thought. Being from Philadelphia, the eye contact was new. It was so memorable, Saligman made a lot of her figures in her mural hold the gaze of the viewer.

Saligman visited Omaha four times before deciding what would make up the content of "Fertile Ground." During her stays, she observed nature and people and tried to learn as much as she could about the area. She interviewed and met hundreds of people, with 50 being selected to be included in the mural. Questions she sought to answer included "What is important to the community? What is unique to the community?"

What she found was a

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beautiful depth in the metro.

"There's a beautiful depth here - depth of character, depth of values, depth of landscape and depth of history," said Saligman. "And that depth is basically what the mural is about."

After months of shifting through books, interviews, photos she took while in Omaha and talks with all parties involved, Saligman created a visual image. From there, the composition came to life, with something that not only visually presented important concepts but also fit well together. It is art, after all.

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Saligman is well known for her murals. She has painted more than 50 murals all over the world, with her most famous mural, "Common Threads," painted in her homebase, Philadelphia. Her "Once in a Millennium Moon" mural in Shreveport, La., is the nation's largest publicly funded mural.

While she says she has no "grand intentions," just wanting people to walk by a mural and go "Whoa, what is that?", Saligman is known for marrying stunning technique with never-been-used technology that she developed.

For "Fertile Ground," she has had Sherman Williams "lab coats" develop new paint chemistry.

"We're using the strongest paint possible," said Saligman. "Strong" means marine-grade paint donated by Sherman Williams. It's designed to withstand the weather and the usual wear-and-tear of time.

The paint is used both directly on the wall of the building as well as on a special sheet that adheres to the wall. The sheet is a non-woven media that is acrylic - as is the paint. The sheet of plastic is primed, painted and then adhered to the building.

The Omaha Mural Project will be documented as a "best practice" study in mural technology because of these innovations and more. From time-lapse photography to the recording of methods and materials the project has drawn the attention and support of the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center in Omaha, the National Institute for Preservation in Washington, D.C., Rescue Public Murals, a nonprofit organization based in Washington D.C., and the preservation Studies Program at the University of Delaware.

Soon, a live feed of the mural's progress will be streamed online courtesy of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, who is also administering and site-managing the project.

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The work of a mural artist is not easy. On a small scale, with paint-stained hands, Saligman carefully blends a color to be "just right" over and over again.

On a larger scale, she and her crew of highly skilled artists and draftsmen have a physically challenging job that involves climbing to great heights to apply the paint.

"They have to be able to draw in the largest scale possible," said Saligman. "It doesn't get any bigger. This is one of the Top 3 murals in the country."

While the physical aspects are daunting enough for most artists, the mural job also requires them to deal with the elements. The summer has introduced them to Midwest weather, complete with 100-degree scorching days, hail and torrential rains.

Winter is a whole other obstacle, though. In October, Saligman plans to return to Philadelphia to paint the remainder of the mural on the plastic sheets over the winter. In the spring of 2009, she'll return to Omaha to finish the mural.

Saligman could not do this alone. From skilled artists to the volunteers to business partners, many have helped. She cites those that have helped mixed the paint, down to the cook at the Mattress Factory (the nearest restaurant to the work site). Her children (she has four, two were in Omaha at the time of this interview) help with cleaning the brushes. There's even a teacher from Bellevue, Neb., who brings his class to the site from time to time to help.

The mural - as much as it is a visual representation of a group - is a group effort.



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Saligman hopes that those who observe "Fertile Ground" will bring what they want to it, focusing not necessarily on the people in the mural but what the mural might represent.

Some may notice the sky and the wide open spaces Saligman purposely placed in the mural. It was more fitting than some of her work found in Philadelphia, for example. Her Philadelphia murals, to some, were crowded. For Omaha, space was needed to fit the region.

Some may notice the detail, the way picture-perfect texture and color are used on such a large-scale canvas.

All will notice that it's something the entire metro area can be proud of.



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