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Big as Life

John Pugh, master of illusion on a grand scale

BY LISA KIRK

John Pugh's *trompe l'oeil* murals are so lifelike they cause mishaps and confusion for the unsuspecting. In 1981, after the completion of his first major project, the mural on Taylor Hall on the CSU, Chico campus, several fender benders occurred because motorists were distracted by what looks like a gaping hole in the building. At a café in San Jose, California, that features a Pugh mural, a customer complained he had received the "silent treatment" when he tried to introduce himself to a pretty woman reading a book. The woman was a painted illusion in Pugh's mural.

Pugh (B.A., Art, '83) wants to clear up a common misconception about his art, one that is understandable when you see his painted illusion of a glass of wine, for example, perched on a "granite ledge," casting a small gray shadow, the burgundy liquid seemingly trembling in the tumbler. Art patrons at the show where this painting was displayed spilled their wine trying to set their own goblets on the "ledge." Because his art is so realistic, people often think it is photorealism, which Pugh says it is *not*.

"I'm not projecting a photo up on the wall and painting it," he explains. "What I do is a little different than that -- a little more original." An understatement, to be sure, from this easygoing artist whose stunning murals grace buildings across the country and have been noted in *Time* magazine.

Pugh's *trompe l'oeil murals* -- a French phrase meaning "to fool the eye" and pronounced

"tromp loy" -- are masterpieces of illusion that begin with research, idea development, and sketches. "Then I take a very accurate slide of the sketch and project the sketch onto the wall," says Pugh. "That's how I get a rough outline of the 'cartoon,' and then I make adjustments because usually when you get it up there that big you see some perspective flaws."

Then the magic begins. Colors and shadows create the mind-boggling illusion of depth that makes us reach for the wineglass or talk to the woman who is eerily "alive."

An artist's vision

As an undergraduate at CSU, Chico, Pugh says, he had the good fortune to be a student of art professor Steve Wilson, now retired. "Steve taught me a lot," acknowledges Pugh. "He was kind of a walking encyclopedia of information." It was Wilson who encouraged Pugh's idea to paint a mural on Taylor Hall.

"I kept eyeing that particular wall ...," he reminisces. "It has a northeastern exposure with little sun, a smooth surface, and it is perpendicular to traffic -- better for a perspective illusion. Plus, it is the downtown entrance to the university with a lot of pedestrian traffic."

Pugh's idea for the mural was inspired by a dream he had in which he witnessed the wall "breaking open." He also considered what people passing that corner might imagine was inside Taylor Hall. "I liked the idea of visually excavating the building to expose a particular imagined vision," he says. "The modern educational façade is broken away to reveal the ancient Greek academe -- the essence of our educational system."

The mural on Taylor Hall marked the debut of Pugh's signature style: exclusively illusionary painting.

Beyond pretty

What is it about trompe l'oeil that people find so appealing? Inherent in every *trompe l'oeil* piece is the delight viewers feel when they realize they are seeing an illusion. "Everyone likes being tricked," says Pugh, "and people kind of bond with a piece, so it's a great language for public art." Pugh believes it is a language that anyone can understand, even those not knowledgeable about art.

"*Trompe l'oeil* presents the opportunity to convey sophisticated concepts, fine arts concepts," he says. "It's a great way for people to be invited into the concept part of the piece that maybe the average viewer wouldn't normally wander into."

Pugh is passionate in his defense of *trompe l'oeil* being used as a fine art form. While he considers light, color, and perspective intrinsic to the craft, it is context that Pugh says lifts *trompe l'oeil* into the realms of fine art. Something must be said besides the illusion, Pugh believes, a value beyond mystery or mere decoration.

Pugh's mural *Woman in Cafe* (in a Los Gatos, California, cafe) is an homage to the Manet painting *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergere*. "I tweaked [the painting] by superimposing a contemporary woman in front of the woman who is normally in the painting," says Pugh, "so it's shifting time within the piece and playing off a classic piece," a technique artists have used for centuries.

Different aspects of a mural's location, including architectural style, elements, and period, play an important part in Pugh's approach. He also responds to the surrounding culture and heritage. In Merced, California, Pugh is creating a mural that illustrates the city's rich and colorful history through the use of symbols and architectural shapes. The Merced River meanders through the mural, flowing from the Yosemite Valley, past the foothills, through an old mill, and finally, past proud field workers in the orchards and crops of the Central Valley.

Valley of the Heart's Delight at the Berryessa Community Center in San Jose is another of Pugh's works-in-progress. This project includes tile mosaics -- illusions of tile mosaics, of course -- of sweeping agricultural scenes, as well as subtle, almost hidden images of the area's first food gatherers, the Ohlone. This fall, Pugh begins a large project at the Palo Alto Medical Foundation in Palo Alto, California. He will also paint a mural at a health center in Sarasota, Florida, this year, and is beginning research for a mural he will paint in a school in Anchorage, Alaska.

While he says he "might be able to squeeze in a little mural," Pugh is booked until 2004, proof that his *trompe l'oeil* masterpieces speak a language we know and love.

Pugh lives near San Jose with his wife, Wendy, a physical therapist. He has a studio in the Santa Cruz mountains where several apprentices and associates work with him. To see more of Pugh's art, log on to his Web site at artofjohnpugh.com.

About the author

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