

More to mural than meets the eye

3-D technique adds measure of mystique to Mainplace Theater

By **MIKE CONWAY**
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MERCED — The granite boulders on the wall along K Street appear ready for a mountain climber to grab. The curving panel looks like it would be a good place for a kid to sneak behind and hide. The entire section of "El Rio de la Merced" seems to jump out at the viewer in 3-D.

And that's the effect John Pugh wanted to create as he finishes the final section of the Mainplace Merced Theater project this weekend.

"It's been a very challenging mural project," Pugh said. "This has been a landmark in my life. I'll never forget Merced."



Muralist John Pugh worked at night through summer, 'Not just for comfort but for the curing of the paint.'

MIKE CONWAY/
MERCED COUNTY BUREAU

The four-panel mural is an artistic depiction of the Merced River from its source in the Yosemite Valley to its use in agriculture.

"The bigger story of Merced is the water," the Los Gatos artist said.

Pugh, 45, has been a muralist for 25 years, creating works across the United States and abroad. He took time away from working on the Merced mural to

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create one in New Zealand. He has created murals for Playboy Playmate Barbi Benton's Hawaii home and one in Winslow, Ariz., honoring the Eagles song "Take It Easy."

Pugh's passion and intensity reflect in his art and his personality. He explains in detail how the shimmering, three-dimensional effect comes from layer upon layer of translucent paint coating the tiles.

"It's more a mosaic mural than a glazed-tile mural. You get a different flavor with it," he said. "The color shifts are what creates the sense of presence."

The style is called trompe l'oeil, or "fool the eye." The eye gets fooled into thinking the

boulders could fall off the wall, or that the water will drench passers-by.

Into that, Pugh incorporates curving walls that lead to unknown spaces. "It allows the mind's eye to explore around the corner. It includes places only the mind's eye can go," he said.

Frank Quintero, the city's economic development manager, said: "Ever since his days at Chico State, John has been able to intrigue people with his 3-D work. The comments overall have been very positive about the art.

"I like it. It's impressive, and it's a good feature for the Mainplace Theater," said Quintero, a fellow alumnus of California State University, Chico.

Working during the summer, Pugh and his crew labored mostly in the dark. "I'm like a vampire out here," he said. "Ninety percent of that was to beat the heat. Not just for comfort but for the curing of the paint."

He needed the cooler temperatures to allow him to blend the painted pieces together.

He had plenty of company on K and 18th streets. "There's no lack of colorful people at 3 in the morning."

The final artistic touch will come from the city, he said. "They're going to put in lights that will give it a wall wash at night. These murals will look two times as dramatic as in the day."