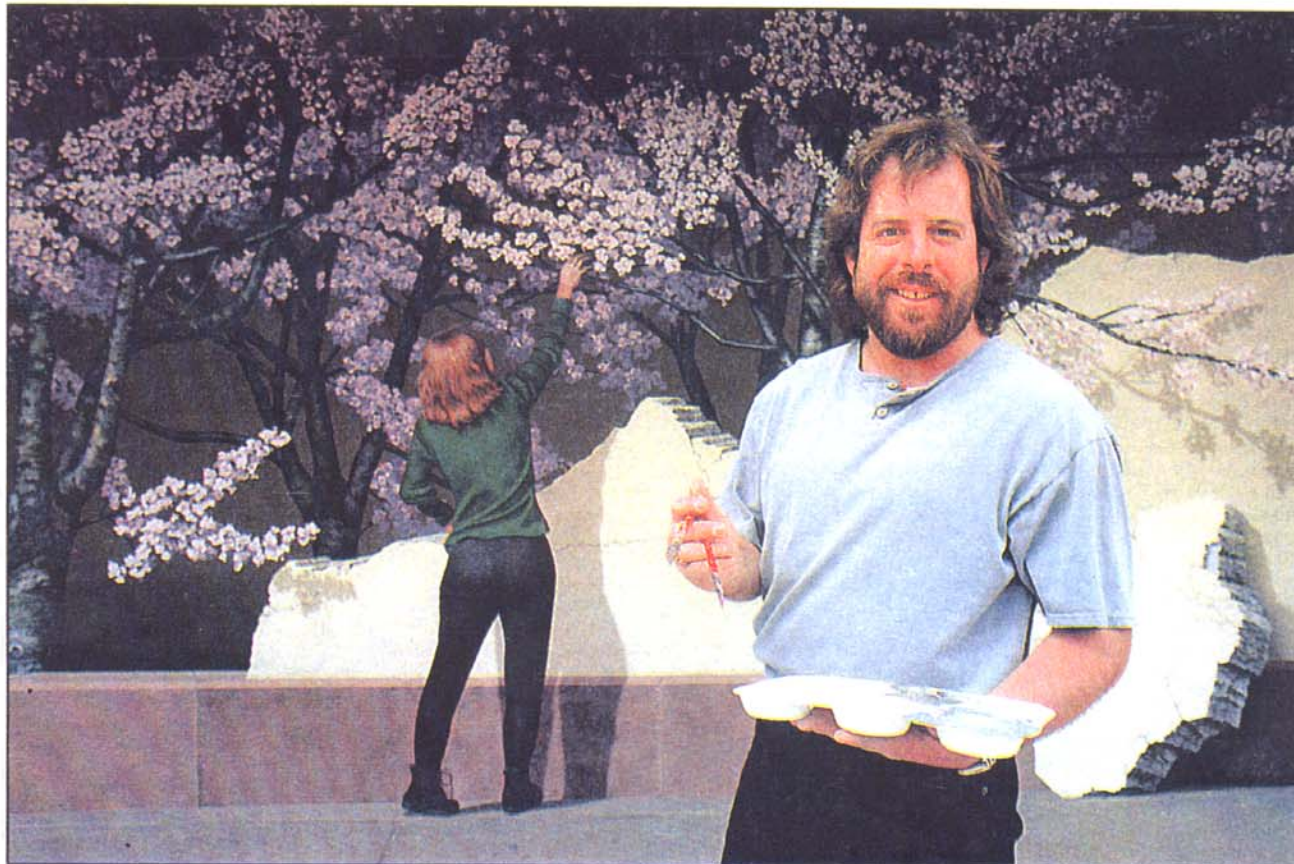


Arts & Entertainment



Ellen Jaskol/Rocky Mountain News

Artist John Pugh is transforming a bare wall in Cherry Creek into a cherry tree orchard.

Rocky Mountain News Staff

Yes, there's a woman standing in front of that cherry tree, reaching up as if to snatch a handful of sweet blossoms.

But don't try to talk to her: The figure who forms the centerpiece of a mural growing in the old portion of the Cherry Creek Shopping Center is a figment of the imagination, John Pugh's imagination, to be precise.

Pugh, a specialist in trompe l'oeil painting, has been hired by the Taubman Co. to transform a bare stucco wall on the Bed, Bath and Beyond Store. The wall faces the west side of the main mall.

So, what may look like cracks are not really cracks. Trees and flowers are daubs of paint. Shadows popping out around awnings are part fiction, part fact. And the woman? She may be modeled on real life — Pugh's wife, Wendy — but she'll never get beyond the fact that the flowers are forever beyond her reach.

It's all part of Pugh's delight in playing with perceptions.

"I'm used to dealing with illusionary architecture," the resident of Los Gatos, Calif., said recently during a painting break. "Here you have a cherry orchard in a building, a slightly less believable circumstance."

Since the early 1980s, Pugh has covered walls around California with more traditional trompe l'oeil ("fool the eye") subjects: shattered walls allowing views of interior rooms, for example, or classical columns towering over people below.

The area at Cherry Creek — a small courtyard between two banks of buildings

A living illusion

Cherry Creek mural comes to 'life' with trompe l'oeil

— fueled the idea for an orchard.

"I saw the site and knew they were planting cherry trees," Pugh said. He first visited the mall in October, then moved here in mid-March to begin work on what is essentially a five-panel "canvas," 120-foot long and 12-feet high. He brought two nearly complete panels with him, leaving three to be finished in place.

It was a wise decision, because Pugh has encountered fickle Colorado weather that has kept him and his assistants off the wall on snowy and windy days. "I didn't know it

was going to snow this much," he said, although he had some warning. "They said the weather changed minute to minute." He is working in a combination of materials: laminated plywood for the panels he tackled in California, stucco and acrylic for on-site work.

The project should be finished early this month.

"We had seen his work before and liked it," said Lisa Herzlich, Cherry Creek marketing director. "We didn't want that back building to be a blank wall, but to have some character and depth."

Taubman is paying Pugh about \$75,000 for the project, she said.

The secret to the style is creating and adhering to an unusual perspective. "I'm creating my own light source and my own angles," he said.

Although Pugh began his art career doing more traditional painting, he moved into "Perspective Illusionism," as his company is called, in the early 1980s as a way to broaden his appeal.

"I knew I had hit my niche because this came very naturally to me. With the vehicle of illusion, I can communicate with a wider audience than just the fine arts community."

It also makes people consider what they confront. "I find it intriguing to mix different architectural spaces with nature in ways you don't ordinarily see. It gives a new meaning and new context to the trees."

And to an encounter with another human being. At least one passerby has tried to talk to the figure in the center panel, Pugh said. "People like to be tricked."