

Indy will show its artistic side with a series of public murals in time for Super Bowl XLVI

By Ashley Petry

Big, colorful works of art are popping up all over Indianapolis.

There's the large-scale image of former Gov. Oliver Morton on the south side of the Summit Building at Pennsylvania and New York streets.

Oversized magnolias -- symbolizing strength, endurance and beauty -- along Ohio Street at the Downtown Canal.

Black-and-white photo-realistic faces from three generations of one family at the New York Street bridge over the canal.

And life-sized images of Fujin and Raijin, the thunder and wind gods of Japan, at the West Street bridge.

The works are all part of "46 for XLVI," an Arts Council of Indianapolis initiative to create 46 murals in Indianapolis -- with most scheduled for completion before Super Bowl XLVI in 2012.

The idea was sparked during last year's Start with Art luncheon, when Mayor Greg Ballard encouraged the local arts community to think boldly.

Dave Lawrence, president and CEO of the arts council, took the message to heart. The organization already was working on plans to refresh existing murals along the canal, but Lawrence saw an opportunity for something bigger.

Hence, "46 for XLVI."

"The goal of this project really is to beautify the city and expose residents and visitors to a public arts program," said Kate Pell, the arts council's marketing and public relations coordinator. "The murals program creates a sense of ownership that residents feel in their neighborhoods."

The project is a revival of the arts council's public art program, a \$12.5 million initiative that began in 2003 and petered out for budget reasons in 2008. During its 5-year life, the program organized temporary citywide exhibitions such as the whimsical bronze sculptures by Tom Otterness, the LED-inspired works by Julian Opie and the intricate tire sculptures by Chakaia Booker.

For inspiration, the arts council turned to cities such as Philadelphia; Portland, Ore.; and Phoenix, which already have successful mural projects. The largest is Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program, founded in 1984. With an annual budget of



Minnesota-based artist Erik R. Pearson painted a mural on the south side of the Summit building at Pennsylvania and New York streets. The home of former Gov. Oliver Morton once stood at this site.

\$7.5 million, it curates more than 3,500 murals throughout the city and sponsors 80 to 100 new ones each year.

The “46 for XLVI” project has a budget of \$500,000, supported by both public and private funds. The largest contributions are \$200,000 from the city and \$150,000 from the Capital Improvement Board.

To select the mural locations, the arts council took suggestions from Keep Indianapolis Beautiful, Indianapolis Downtown Inc., the mayor’s office and other organizations.

In all, 35 artists -- about a third from Central Indiana -- will create murals for the project. They were selected by a panel of gallery owners, fellow artists and museum curators.

One of those artists is Minnesota resident Erik Pearson. For each mural he paints, he researches the history of the area and incorporates that story into his design.

His mural on the Summit building, at Pennsylvania and New York streets, tells the story of that site, where Gov. Oliver Morton’s home once stood. The current building was constructed in 1909 and has been home to two piano companies, two insurance companies, the American Radiator Company and several other businesses -- all of which are represented in Pearson’s mural.

“I actually started thinking of the city as being a house, and people want to decorate their house to make it feel more welcoming and inviting,” Pearson said. “That’s what the murals seem like to me. It’s like hanging a painting, and suddenly it feels like home.”



Erik Pearson works on his mural on the Summit Building. Thirty-five artists were commissioned to paint murals. Most will be completed before Indianapolis hosts the Super Bowl in early February.

Local artist Carl Leck is approaching his mural -- on the Michigan Street bridge over the canal -- from a more whimsical perspective. He is creating an illusion of a three-dimensional aquarium.

“I always looked at the koi fish (in the canal), so it stemmed from that,” Leck said. “I hope to communicate that this sort of thing is fun, and it’s supposed to be enjoyable.”

Leck is also sketching a paint-by-numbers mural along East 10th Street. It will be completed by volunteers during the Lilly Day of Service on Oct. 6.

While many of the 46 murals highlight traditional painting techniques, a few feature unconventional materials.

For her mural on the Vermont Street pedestrian bridge, local ceramicist Barbara Zech is creating an abstract mosaic with pebbles and tiles.

“The concentric circle design kind of represents water ripples or drops of water, which relates to the canal,” she said. “Another big aspect of my piece is the tactile quality, so you can touch it and feel the features on it.”

For the 35 artists, the project does more than create immediate work opportunities. It also raises the profile of visual art in the community and serves as a permanent testimonial to their abilities.

The murals also have larger implications for economic development, said Peter Kageyama, author of “For the Love of Cities.” His book argues that cities should create ways for citizens to become emotionally invested in -- and build

“relationships” with -- their communities.

Often, he said, small touches like bike paths, dog parks and public art create the largest payoffs in terms of emotional connection.

“The murals . . . become a way of creating a shared narrative,” he said. “It doesn’t cost a lot of money, but a coat of paint in the right hands can do amazing things.”

Indiana artists

Of the 35 artists selected to participate in the Arts Council of Indianapolis’ “46 for XLVI” murals project, more than 10 are based in Indiana. Here’s a list of the local artists creating works of art for the project. (All are from Indianapolis, unless otherwise noted.)

- » Carl Leck
- » John Domont
- » Barbara Stahl
- » Barbara Zech
- » Kyle Ragsdale
- » Tom Torluemke (Dyer, Ind.)
- » FAB Crew
- » Artur Silva
- » Amy Rheinhardt
- » Wug Laku
- » Doug Stanley
- » Clayton Hamilton
- » Andy Miller (Columbus, Ind.)
- » William Denton Ray
- » Pamela Bliss