

City of Grass Valley Transportation Art Proposal

Hwy 49 Overpass

City of Grass Valley Universal
Planning Application
Major- Master Sign Programs

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BACKGROUND:

Downtown Grass Valley, a historical treasure in California’s Gold Rush country, radiates charm through the downtown business district. The area hums with a lively mix of past and present, where iconic landmarks like the Del Oro Theatre share the stage with modern shops and public spaces. This fusion of heritage and vitality make the area a cultural cornerstone, recognized as a California designated “Cultural District”; a distinction shared with only a dozen other locations in the state. Downtown Grass Valley draws people into its welcoming embrace as they visit Mill Street Plaza, attend a show at the Center for the Arts, or gather for special events hosted throughout the year by the chamber of commerce.

The heartbeat of this downtown lies at the busy crossroads of South Auburn Street, Neal Street, and State Highway 174. Here, the main routes converge, funneling travelers and locals alike into the bustling core of Grass Valley. Yet, just beyond this inviting gateway looms the Highway 49 overpass—a jarring counterpoint to the area’s warmth. Spatially creating the eastern edge of downtown, its stark, utilitarian bulk casts a shadow over the quaint streets below, clashing with the historical elegance that defines the district. The cold, imposing presence, disrupts the visual harmony of Grass Valley, serving as a blunt reminder of the industrial world encroaching on nostalgic charm. For years, it stood as a functional necessity but an aesthetic misfit.



In 2021, a Grass Valley police officer reimagined the overpass not as a blight, but as a blank slate ready for transformation. He envisioned a mural that could breathe life into the concrete, turning a dreary structure into a striking centerpiece. This bold idea aimed to weave art into the urban fabric, bridging the gap between the city’s storied past and its creative future. His proposal struck a chord, swiftly earning enthusiastic backing from

city administration and the City Council, all of whom saw its potential to elevate the area's spirit and pride.

With approval, the mural stands poised to redefine the overpass, splashing its drab surface with color and meaning. More than a beautification effort, it embodies Grass Valley's ability to harmonize its rich history with a vibrant, modern vision. By turning a utilitarian structure into a canvas of community appreciation, the city not only enhances its downtown appeal but also cements its legacy as a place where creativity thrives. This project promises to inspire all who encounter it, ensuring Grass Valley's unique character endures as a source of wonder for years to come.

The proposed project is fully feasible under the Caltrans Transportation Art Program guidelines, which encourage artistic enhancements to transportation infrastructure while supporting community identity. This mural aims to beautify the space and highlight the natural world surrounding our area, showcasing the Sierra Nevada foothills' rugged landscapes, native flora, and wildlife. A project of this scale and ambition is unique to the region, with no comparable transportation art example currently existing in the foothills, marking it as a pioneering effort to blend cultural expression with functional infrastructure in Nevada County.

SUMMARY OF TRANSPORTATION ART REQUIREMENTS:

The Caltrans Transportation Art Program, launched in 1977 by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), integrates art into the state's transportation infrastructure, enhancing highways and public spaces with community-driven works. Partnering with public agencies—cities, counties, towns, tribal governments, and non-federally recognized tribes—it allows for the installation of graphic or sculptural art in state rights-of-way, either freestanding or on features like noise barriers, retaining walls, or bridges. These pieces aim to beautify, reflect local history or character, and boost pride.

Strict guidelines ensure safety and function. Art must celebrate community identity, be scaled appropriately, and allow safe maintenance per Caltrans rules. It must not include text, mimic traffic devices (per the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices), or use reflective/glaring finishes. Moving elements, simulated motion, or symbols like flags and logos (beyond limited sponsor recognition) are banned, as are designs impacting structures, drainage, or sightlines. Artworks require durability, low maintenance, and full funding by sponsors for their lifecycle. Painting on structures—latex on concrete or any on steel—needs Division of Maintenance approval to avoid hiding cracks or stressing bridges. Proposals progress through concept, preliminary, qualified, and final reviews by District Coordinators, ensuring compliance. Artists work via agencies, submitting plans and agreements like the Local Agency Agreement and Copyright License and Waiver of Moral Rights in Artwork (CLAW).

The renderings for Grass Valley's transportation art project, detailed in later pages, are designed to meet these criteria while fulfilling the city's beautification goals. We expect to transform a utilitarian space—the Highway 49 overpass—into a vibrant showcase of local heritage. These designs promise to enhance the downtown gateway, blending seamlessly with its Victorian charm and fostering community pride.

SUMMARY OF PARTNERSHIPS AND FUNDING:

In the early planning stages of Grass Valley's transportation art project, Councilwoman Haven Caravelli recognized the importance of partnering with local artists to achieve the goal. Under her leadership, the vision of incorporating many different artists into one project was born. Additionally, rather than the City trying to coordinate with individual artists, Councilwoman Caravelli suggested partnering with The Chambers Project whom she'd worked with in the past on various mural projects in other parts of downtown. Through her experience, she knew The Chambers Project had the network and expertise to bring the artists together.

The Chambers Project, an art studio and gallery in Grass Valley, helmed by Owner/Director Brian Chambers, is known for its focus on psychedelic art. Its role in Nevada County's creative scene made collaborating with the gallery a natural fit. Chambers eagerly agreed to join the effort, seeing it as a way to connect his gallery's work with a public project that could improve Grass Valley.

The Chambers Project put out a call-to-action within their network and brought in nine Nevada County artists to contribute to the project. Many had shown their work at the gallery and were willing to meet Caltrans' standards while capturing the area's history and spirit. Each artist was assigned one, and in some cases two, of the overpass's 11 support pillars where the art will ultimately be applied.

As planning moved forward, the project's cost estimate was created; \$250,000-\$300,000. These costs cover the artist fees, materials, and installation. Caltrans requires the sponsoring agency to fully fund any transportation art project, which was a challenge for City organizers. The Chambers Project came through again, connecting with a donor who agreed to cover the entire amount after learning about the project's purpose and impact.

The donor, a private individual interested in art and community improvement, committed to providing the full \$250,000-\$300,000, removing any immediate financial pressure from the City. Said donor has asked to remain anonymous, preferring attention stay on the artwork's benefit to Grass Valley.

With funding secured, this project can proceed without posing an immediate financial burden. The City will be responsible for upkeep, as required by Caltrans. Maintenance costs—such as repairs and cleaning—are expected to increase over time but should be minimal for the first few years after installation. This gives Grass Valley time to plan for future expenses while benefiting from the mural's presence.

Artiest Biography, Mural Concept & Overlay

Pg. 8-40

The following pages include artist information and their submitted renders. Each artist describes in detail how their contribution is include and inspired by the local areas natural beauty and wildlife.

Please Note: Many of the renders you will see are on a individual pillar the artist chose to use for overlay. Ultimately each of these renders will be applied to different pillars.

Artist: Alida Frey

Stated Theme: "Splendor in the Grass Valley"

Statement:

I make paintings about the mystery of the wilderness and its ability to capture or free one's psyche. Since moving to Nevada County in 2020, the flora and fauna of the Sierra foothills have presented me with endless artistic inspiration-meadows of blooming wildflowers, towering pines that seem to possess individual personalities, sprawling oak trees of many varieties.

My proposal for the Grass Valley underpass mural is a landscape depicting natural elements known and loved by locals and visitors. In the foreground is a meadow including California poppies, white linen poppies, lupines, and yarrow. Beyond the meadow is a canopy of pines including Ponderosa, Doug Fir, Sugar Pine, and Cedar. The mountains recede into the distance where they meet a Sierra sunset. My aim in this painting is that driving through the underpass might feel as though the driver is atop their favorite local vista at sunset.

Render Submission Alida Frey



Render Submission- Alida Frey (isolated)



Artist: California Heritage: Indigenous Research Project (CHIRP)

Stated Theme: The Marysville Buttes

Statement:

California Heritage: Indigenous Research Project (CHIRP) is a Tribally-guided nonprofit dedicated to Preserving, Protecting, and Perpetuating Nisenan Culture.

Due to its illegal federal termination in 1964, the Nevada City Rancheria (NCR) Nisenan Tribe is barred from accessing federal programming and services that support Tribal communities. To address the legal vacuum created by the Tribe's federal disbandment, CHIRP acts as proxy for the NCR Nisenan Tribe and its approximately 140 members.

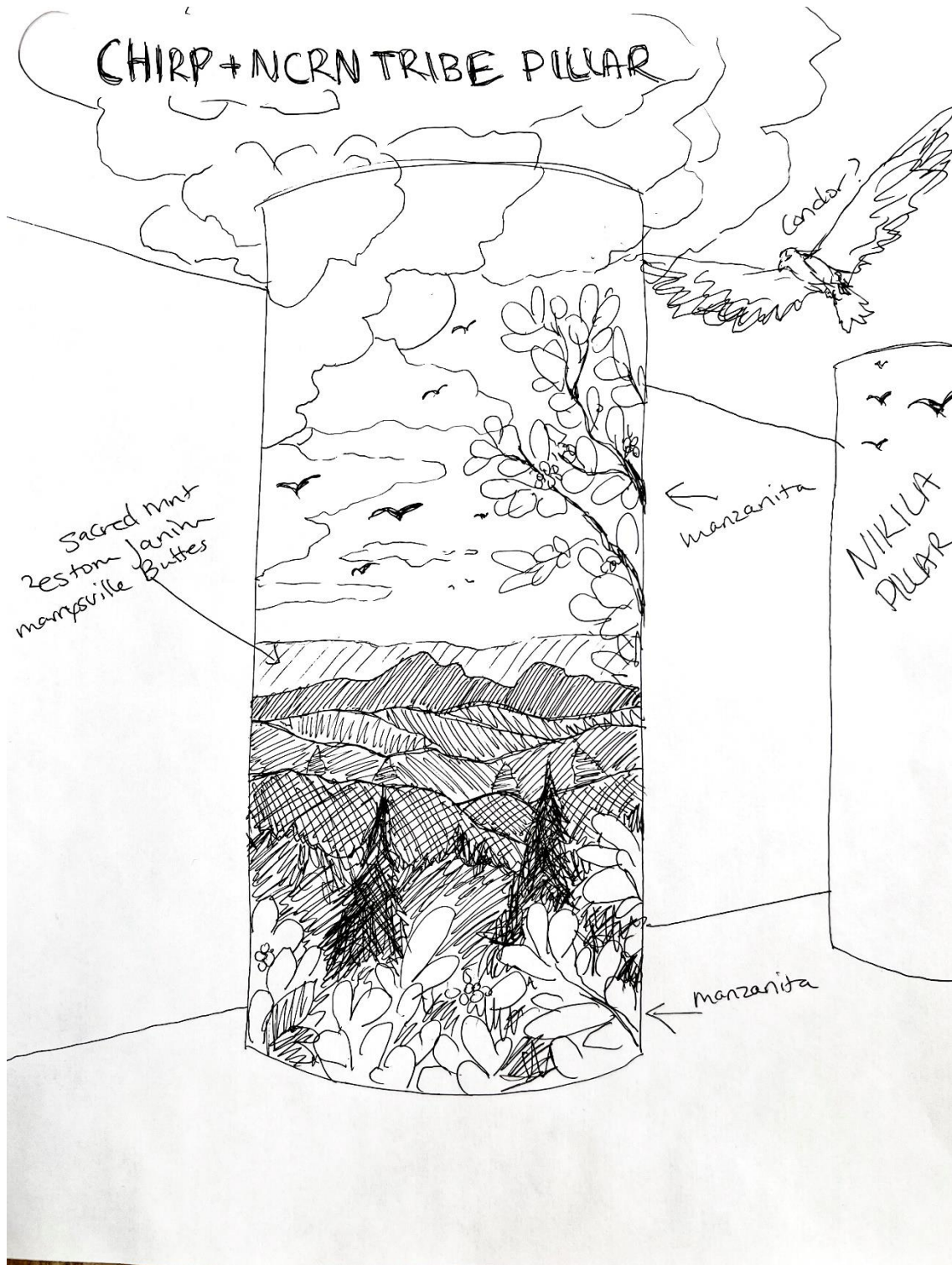
Together, CHIRP and the NCR Tribal Council work to identify, fund, and implement programs and projects to address and mitigate the ongoing social, environmental and racial injustices brought to the Tribe's Homelands in 1848, until the time when the Tribe's federal recognition and sovereignty is restored.

CHIRP and the Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan Tribe's mural pillar draws deeply from the natural landscape and cultural heritage that defines the Nisenan experience in this region. Central to the design is ʔestom janim (the Marysville Buttes), a sacred mountain range in Nisenan cosmology that holds profound spiritual significance to the Tribe and is visible from several lookout points throughout Nevada County. This sacred landmark connects past and present, grounding the mural in the rich legacy of the Nisenan people. The surrounding imagery features local plants and animals that are essential to Nisenan life and traditions, including oak trees, manzanita, and birds such as condors and flickers. These elements reflect the interconnectedness of the Nisenan people with the land, embodying their culture's enduring presence. The mural not only honors the history of this area but also celebrates its vibrant, ongoing connection to the natural world that sustains and inspires all of us.

Render Submission- CHIRP



Render Submission- CHIRP (side two)



Artist: Colin Prah

Stated Theme: Yuba Vista

Statement:

Colin Prah is a painter and illustrator currently living and working in Grass Valley, California. Born and raised in Potsdam, New York he studied illustration at universities on the east coast from 2008-2012 and lived in NYC for eight years before moving to California in 2020. Influenced by architectural renderings, psychedelia, optical illusions, scientific and futuristic illustration, he has had two solo shows at The Chambers Project in Grass Valley; Geodaesia in 2019 and Limit Sequence in 2022.

Yuba Vista is a proposed mural inspired by the light cascades within the river valleys of the Sierra Nevada. The curving and steep channels cut by local rivers are a favorite destination for locals and travelers to experience the natural wonder of the Sierra foothills with their dense vegetation and shifting illumination through the passing day. Color selection is built on the early morning and late evening light effects bringing purples, blues and reds into the greenery of the trees as sun and shadow mix with mist and moisture. The column structure to be painted provides a circular composition for this illusion of distant space to repeat back on itself creating an inside out panoramic view of an idealized local river valley.

Render Submission- Colin Prahl



Render Submission- Colin Prahl (isolated)



Artist: Damon Soule

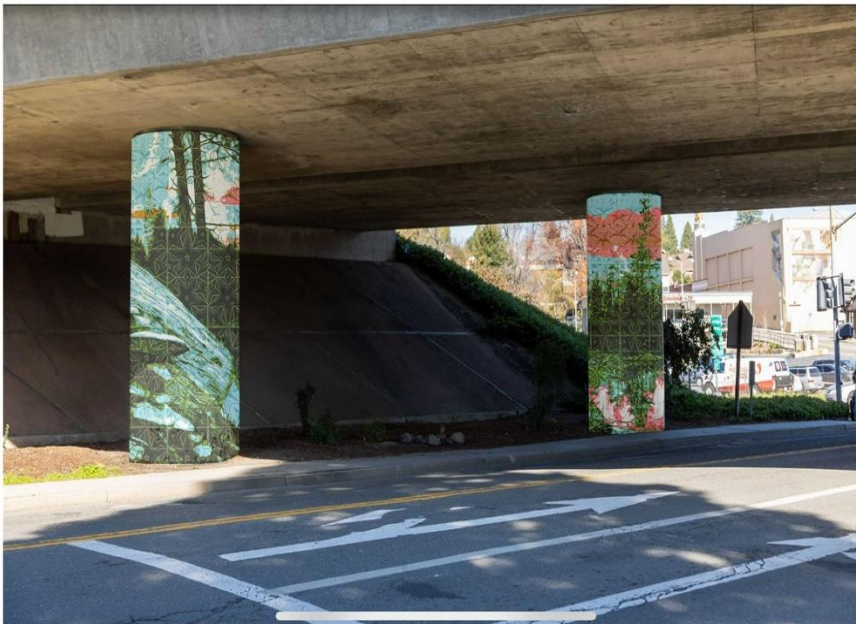
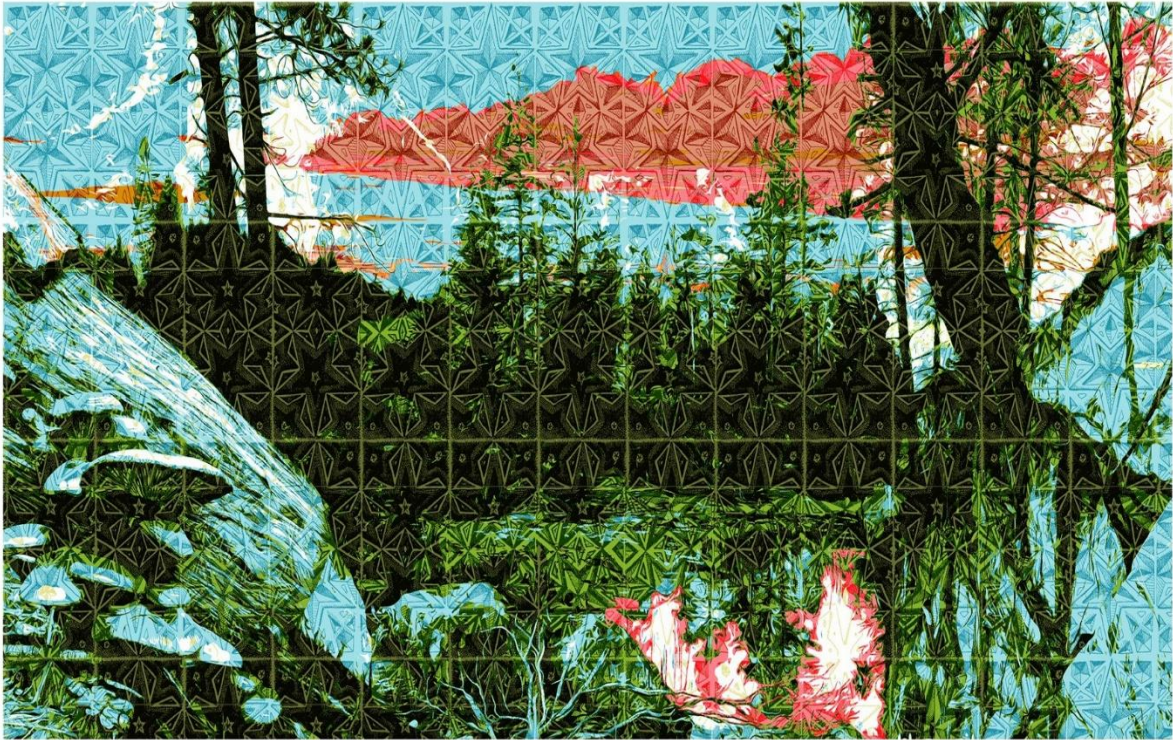
Stated Theme: Local Landscape and Hidden Details

Statement:

Damon Soule is a painter and installation artist who has been practicing full-time for nearly 30 years. Inspired by nature, geometry, physics, metaphysics, patterns, and synchronicity, he primarily creates abstract art but occasionally incorporates figurative elements obfuscated with geometric patterns. His work often features dynamic movement, shapes, and textures, reflecting his view of art as not just a career but a way of being and thinking about the world and its hidden spaces. Deeply influenced by his surroundings, Damon moved to Grass Valley in 2014, drawn by the friendly community, the emphasis on local businesses, and the natural beauty of the area.

His public mural proposal in Grass Valley, CA, is based on a collage of photos taken on nature hikes along local trails. The photos feature native tree, plant, and fungi species. The mural aims to capture the essence of the local landscape and its hidden details, blending geometric elements with nature's forms to create a harmonious visual experience.

Render Submission- Damon Soule



D Soule

Artist: Forest Aliya

Stated Theme: Black Oak in Nevada County

Statement:

Forest Aliya is fine art mural painter. She has lived locally in Nevada City, Ca for 14 years. She has been an active artist in the community of Nevada County and beyond for many years. She has received her Master of Fine Arts at Pacific Northwest College of the Arts in 2019. Her local murals can be seen at Alternative Resource Center in Grass Valley, a portrait of Lotta Crabtree in the lobby of the Nevada City theater, and assisted Sarah Coleman in the WolfCreek Mural located the McKnight Shopping center on the side of Target. Her personal artwork has been exhibited nationally and internationally.

“My column mural design for the Grass Valley Underpass project will be a celebration and appreciation of the native Black Oak in Nevada County. I will portray with exterior acrylic paint and nova color mural paint the Black Oak in the wet winter season. It adorns itself with beautiful array of colorful turkey tail mushrooms and oyster mushrooms. When it feels vulnerable to the weather and insects it covers itself with bright green moss, mekera meriziesli and a hanging lace lichen, and Flavoparmelia lichen. My design will show all of the plant life growing simultaneously and symbiotically together on the surface of the Black oak helping it survive while it sleeps during the winter months.”

Render Submission- Forest Aliya



Render Submission- Forest Aliya (isolated)



Artist: Julian Vadas

Stated Theme- Yuba

Statement:

Julian Vadas is a visual artist who has been in Nevada County since 2017. Julian is originally from Ohio, and he completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting from the State University of New York at Potsdam in 2009. He specializes in elaborate abstractions in acrylic or oil. He has worked and exhibited in a variety of locations around the world before landing in Nevada County. Julian's studio and gallery are located in a historic building in downtown Nevada City and his space has become a staple of the Nevada City Artwalk in recent years.

Julian's project "Yuba" is a proposal for the CalTrans Grass Valley Underpass Mural. The composition features the iconic granite of the Yuba river canyon in the foreground. An angled perspective leads to the trademark turquoise waters of the Yuba weaving its way through a maze of fascinating geology.

Render Submission- Julian Vadas



Render Submission- Julian Vadas (isolated)



Artist: Justin Lovato

Stated Theme: New Color to the Neighborhood

Statement:

Born in 1986 in Northern California, Justin Lovato is a self-taught artist who found his passion and artistic home in boundary-pushing styles that range from Optical Art to Surrealist. Lovato is inspired by the purest art forms found in nature – patterns, bifurcating ratios of plant growth, or clouds creating light swirling sunset or sunrise skies. His connection to nature is undeniable in his work. From living in the lush mountainous terrain of western Washington to the rolling hills of the western Sierra Nevada in Northern California, his work cultivates an aesthetic appreciation and concern for the natural world. Nowhere is this concept better represented than in his mural work, especially in the city of Grass Valley, where the artist drew from his appreciation of Rick Griffin, and the psychedelic poster artists. The result is a playful representation of the area's history as a Gold Rush town and the natural beauty it still offers. The mural inspired the city to work with other artists. Grass Valley is now a designated Arts and Cultural District by the California Arts Council.

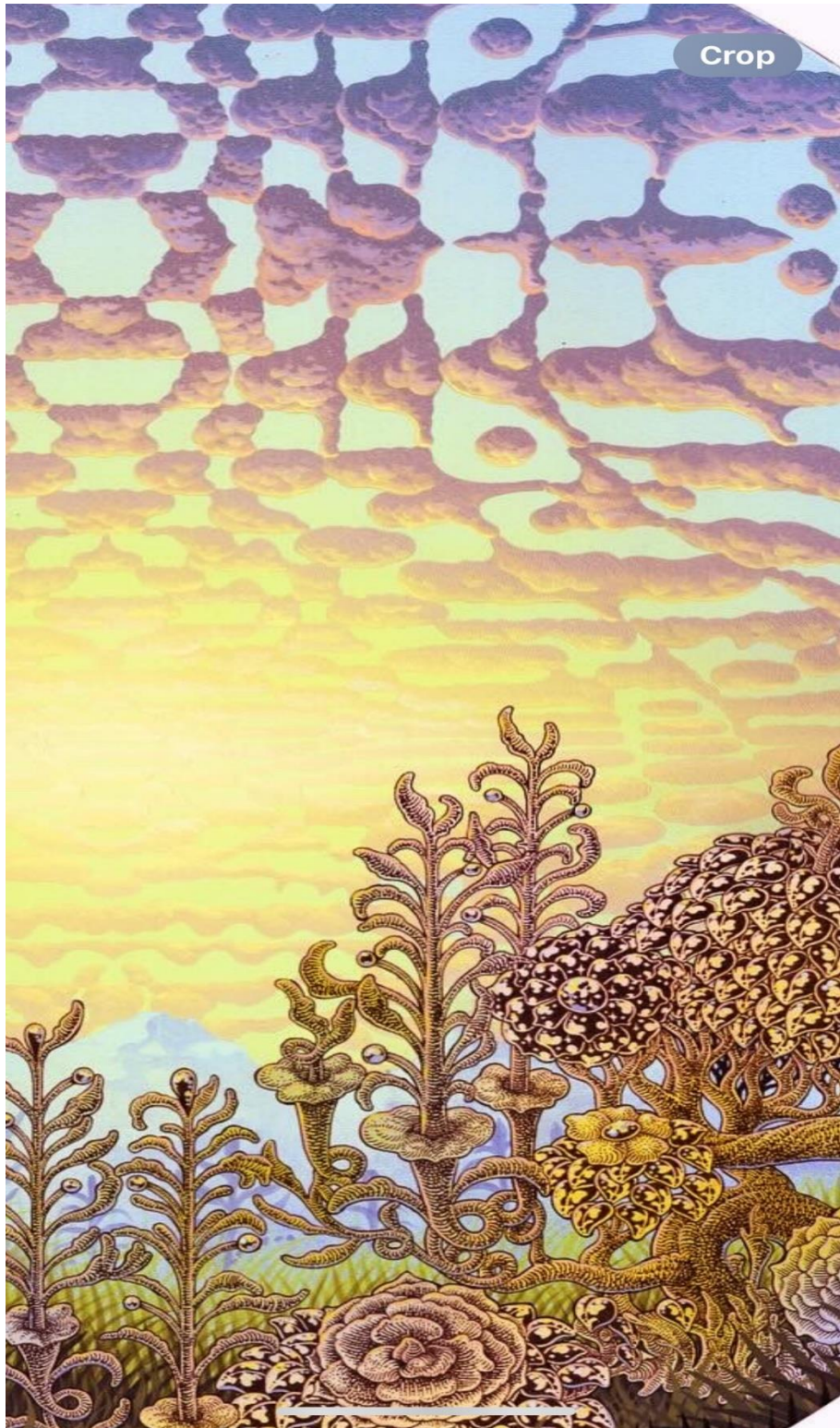
As a Nevada City resident who loves his home and is raising a family here, I'm thrilled to possibly be doing another mural in Grass Valley. In 2017 while painting the "Grass Valley" mural on East Main St it was a great opportunity to share my art with the public, but also to interface and connect with the locals. Friends, strangers and people of all ages were able to see the process of a piece of art being made, and I got to share my knowledge and hopefully inspire some younger people interested in pursuing the arts.

We intend to bring some new color to the neighborhood that will reflect and emphasize the beauty of our community and its striking natural environment. I'm looking forward to contributing my work to make a vibrant addition to the local atmosphere of Grass Valley with a remarkable roster of other artists.

Render Submission- Justin Lovato



Render Submission- Justin Lovato (isolated)



Artist: Nikila Badua

Stated Theme: Returning Home

Statement:

Born in the Hawaiian Islands and raised between Oahu and the Bay Area, Nikila is a Cultural Community Artist working under the alias “MamaWisdom1”. Self-taught in the multidisciplinary arts as a muralist, designer, performer, and arts educator, she has dedicated her skills to serving cultural and community projects for over 25 years. Her work as an advocate and grassroots organizer for youth, indigenous, and environmental movements has played an influential role within shaping her creative path, utilizing the arts as a tool for decolonization, educational reform, and building cultural relations.

“Returning Home” honors the northern flicker, a sacred bird to the Nisenan and many California tribes, whose feathers have been used for centuries in traditional headdresses. A member of the woodpecker family, the flicker’s distinct triangular markings reflect patterns found in Indigenous art around the world. As a symbol of renewal, the flickers in this design spread their wings to open the path for the return of the Chinook salmon, once abundant in Northern California’s waterways. Salmon hold deep cultural and spiritual significance for native California tribes, appearing at the heart of creation stories as a teacher and elder guiding the human race. Historically thriving in the South Yuba River, giant salmon sustained indigenous communities through winter, but habitat destruction, dams, and environmental changes have pushed Chinook salmon to endangered levels throughout California. In August 2024, a historic initiative reintroduced Chinook salmon into the Yuba River, marking a crucial step in restoring balance to the ecosystem and honoring the Indigenous tribes who have long advocated for their return as part of a larger commitment to environmental stewardship, resilience, and the interwoven balance of land, water, and life.

Render Submission- Nikila Badua

TITLE OF ARTWORK: "RETURNING HOME"

ARTIST: NIKILA BADUA AKA MAMAWISDOM1



Render Submission- Nikila Badua (isolated)

TITLE OF ARTWORK: "RETURNING HOME"

ARTIST: NIKILA BADUA AKA MAMAWISDOM1



TITLE OF ARTWORK: "RETURNING HOME"

ARTIST: NIKILA BADUA AKA MAMAWISDOM1



Artist: Oliver Vernon

Stated Theme: Manzanita

Statement:

I moved from the East Coast to California in 2010. Where I come from in upstate New York, Manzanita Trees do not exist. After moving here I was seduced by their ubiquitous beauty. The deep red color of the trunks and branches are like wine, and when the rain comes the color only intensifies into saturated glossy radiance. The movement of the branches twist into flowing patterns which often surprise with their irregular design, as if they were artists themselves seeking to find their own individual sculptural expression. The bark is as smooth as human skin, and as it wraps the contours of the hardwood it further invokes reference to human musculature. The complex beauty of its seasonal shedding is a continuing reminder of renewal. The flowers and berries show up part-time to offer another layer of harmonious color to the palette, with their blending combinations of whites, pinks and yellows. The leaves are like pastel mint coins.

Grass Valley is a place both of rich history and progressive thinking, with many alternate paths converging in a contemporary discourse. My concept for the mural is a fusion of old and new, representing the natural beauty that preceded our arrival, and the new trajectories that are shaping its future.

Render Submission- Oliver Vernon



Render Submission- Oliver Vernon (isolated)



Artist: Sarah Coleman

Stated Theme: Calm, Peaceful Feelings

Statement:

I have lived in and around Nevada County for most of my life. The beautiful natural environment and the creative, soulful community make it hard to leave.

The imagery in this proposal is Nevada County through and through. The sandhill cranes fly overhead every Spring and Fall marking the seasonal changes. The pine needles create star-like shapes and fill the air with a fresh forest aroma. Other flora like milkweed provide important parts of the food chain for migrating butterflies. The legacy of gold in the hills captivates all with its shine and lore.

This is a dream-like interpretation of Nevada County. It is meant to promote calm, peaceful feelings and gratitude for the beauty we are surrounded by. I hope it will inspire all who pass by, whether on foot or in cars.

Render Submission- Sarah Coleman



Render Submission- Sarah Coleman (isolated)



Artist: Ursula Xanthe

Stated Theme: Celebration of the Flora and Fauna

Statement:

Ursula Xanthe Young is a artist and muralist, local to the area for 15+ years, and has created a plethora of large scale murals in the local area, around the US and beyond. Recently she has been working with school kids on several large scale school mural projects in Nevada County.

Our local ecosystem is fragile, and non-native species threaten the ones that have been here for centuries. The projected mural on one of the underpass posts will be a celebration of the flora and fauna that are native to Nevada County. Ursula's vision for this artwork will be to create a landscape built up of layers of silhouetted Sierra mountain ranges as the background layer, the mid-ground will be of a ponderosa pine forest featuring local birds: hawks, stellar jay and more. The foreground will be full of her signature bright orange California poppies, and other local wildflowers, such as lupine & yarrow. She plans to include local butterfly and moth species into the final design, creating a mural that contrasts bright colored and rendered florals against the shades of mountain backgrounds - that will be easily identifiable to passers-by.

Render Submission- Ursula Xanthe



Grass Valley Underpass Project

05.25.2024

MURAL PROPOSAL BY ARTIST URSULA X. YOUNG

Render Submission- Ursula Young (isolated)



COPYWRITE WAIVER INFORMAITON:

All nine Nevada County artists contributing to the Grass Valley transportation art project have submitted copyright waivers as required under the Caltrans Transportation Art Program, specifically the Copyright License and Waiver of Moral Rights in Artwork (CLAW). Due to the multi-page nature of each waiver, they are not included in this proposal to conserve space; however, these documents are fully executed and available upon request for review by relevant stakeholders or Caltrans officials.