

Letter for Roscoe

It is rare when a community invites me to paint a mural in their town, that I am given much creative license. Most cities want some version of “live-work-play, welcome to our town!” Or, they want something they’d like to copy-cat they’ve seen in another City. But in this case, I was challenged to present a design authentic to a sense of place, but also authentic to my own artistic voice.

It is important to me in my career as a public artist that the murals that go up speak to the nuances of place. Who are we? What is *our* landscape like? What do we love that keeps us here? What do we see in what others dismiss as “flyover country”? What do we feel looking out of the airplane window as we return *home*? Since I was 18, I’ve made paintings that seek to describe the peculiar relationship we have in the Midwest to our landscape. This mural features an aerial view of the Pecatonica River as it flows towards the Rock River. I was taken with the interactions of our midwestern agricultural grid with the wildness of the river. I hoped in a literal but also metaphoric way the mural could uniquely capture the landscape, character, and history of your area – agriculture and industry, sewn together by your streams and rivers.

This mural was one of the first major commissions that invited me to make a painterly, gestural, and atmospheric image at this scale, bringing my studio work fully into the public realm. The challenge was exciting, because this type of mural is somewhat rare – it is not a schematic or a paint by number thrown up there with rollers. It’s very material, hand painted entirely with 2” and 3” brushes, full of texture, moments to discover, and the joy of impressionistic painting wherein an image clear from afar dissolves up close into a concert of abstract marks.

Because of the positive response to the mural and how it has been shared, many other communities liked what they saw, and invited me to make similar feeling murals in their towns. Murals that feel like *paintings* not graphics, ask more questions than they answer, and do not overwhelm the day to day life with something trendy or garish. Without being in-your-face, its atmospheric and abstract qualities invite contemplation and interpretation. It has become a pivotal mural in my career as a public artist.

Murals don’t last forever. The most beloved are maintained and restored, others fade away – but it would be a shame for this mural to leave after such a short tenure. The wonderful thing about murals is that all they require is a wall and some will – and I know Roscoe is not a community short on either. There’s room in Roscoe for many voices, and audience for each.

Thomas Agran

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