

November 14, 2001 | Willow Glen, California Since 1992

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Photograph by Tsutomu Fujita

Brush Strokes: Willow Glen resident John Pugh, a trompe l'oeil muralist, works on a mural of a mosaic for El Camino Hospital in Mountain View. The mural will mimic real tiles that are already on a wall.

Willow Glen resident paints pretty perfect pictures that mirror reality

John Pugh practices an art form that aims to fool the eye

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By Mary Ann Cook

Willow Glen resident John Pugh has carved out a niche for himself in the art world, a niche that's a natural for him, in a medium that combines architecture, craftsmanship and wit riding in tandem with fine art. He's a *trompe l'oeil* muralist, and has been refining the craftiness and craft in his art for the past 23 years.

Trompe l'oeil (pronounced "trump loy") is a French phrase meaning "fool the eye," and Pugh's work certainly does that. People have been known to strike up conversations with the human figures in Pugh's work or try to set a glass down on a table in one of his compositions.

Trompe l'oeil is more accessible than almost any artwork, and since Pugh increasingly works on public art, his pieces are even more accessible. His work has universal appeal, he says, because "everyone likes to be tricked." Further, he maintains, the viewer even bonds with his murals, wants to befriend them.

"Everyone does a double take. And the musicians who come here all claim they make a pass at her," says Judy Hackett of Espresso Garden & Cafe in San Jose, talking about the 13-by-20-foot mural in her place, which depicts a quiet anteroom arched in brick. At a small table on the side, an attractive brunette appears to be reading. The reader is Chelsea Cawley, who is a model and former Pugh assistant.

The mural title is *Art Imitating Life Imitating Art Imitating Life*, and the cafe, under a former owner, was originally named the Trompe L'oeil Cafe.

A recent installation can be found at the Great Bear Coffee Shop in Los Gatos. This is an homage to Manet's painting, *The Bar at the Folies Bergeres*. In it a woman stands behind a wine bar. Behind her is a mirror so that the woman is seen from both the front and back.

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In Pugh's version the woman is now in modern dress. The model is Los Gatan Kelly Cunningham, chosen because of her resemblance to the character in the original painting. The mirror also reflects a male figure not in Manet's work. This is Bill Trieglaff, a mountain resident and a regular at the coffee shop.

Pugh himself is a regular, and he suggested to owner Sue Ann Van Epps that a back corner in the shop would lend itself nicely to a mural. Van Epps agreed, and says, "It sparks a lot of conversation, gets people interested. It's fun to watch the discovery process as they study it." A copy of the original painting is posted beside the mural.

Pugh is commissioned for private owners, as well. One graces a private wine cellar, a Grecian motif titled *Pompeian Niche with Krater*. A classic Grecian bowl is front and center; in the background are three naked nymphs, heads encircled with grapevine wreaths.



Tools of the Trade: Muralist John Pugh uses patches of color during the early stages of a project to help him envision the finished product.

Photograph by Tsutomu Fujita

"Trompe l'oeil murals are in a language widely understood, a language most people can appreciate. It's a great language for a wide audience," the artist says. Indeed, his audience is so vast it's international. He estimates he gets more press overseas than he does in the United States.

Articles about his work have appeared in England, Spain, Italy, Poland, Australia, Africa and Asia. He's been noted in major newspapers throughout the United States, and the Aug. 13 issue of *Time* magazine showed his work in a compilation titled *Can You Trompe This?*

The work pictured in *Time* is a public art installation in Twentynine Palms that looks unfinished. This, of course, is no accident. The background is deliberately incomplete--to show the viewer something of the process of mural making.

Two major (finished) images dominate the foreground: a large bull and a scaffolding with the artist asleep on it. The title is *Cattle Days in Hidden Valley*. The bull has seemingly wandered in and is marked with the outlaw Mchaney band brand. Outlaw bands would rebrand cattle and sell them.

The model for the artist is Pugh assistant Mark Molchan. Behind the sleeping artist is the mural being painted, in various stages of completion--grid lines, sketches, blocks of color. This incomplete look adds to the illusion, says its creator.

If the background were finished, it would clamor for attention from the foreground figures; this way the background remains two-dimensional, and the foreground takes command because it's three dimensional. Murals are active art--full of artistic energy and community involvement, Pugh says.

Leaving this piece looking unfinished creates a mural in perpetual activity. And it tells the viewer something about what's finished and what's not, Pugh adds, another riddle that appeals to the trompe l'oeil craftsman.

Besides Molchan, several others assist Pugh in his Los Gatos studio, including longtimers Brandon Bredo, Manuel Cruz, Susan Cook and Jeff Bryant. Bryant, of Saratoga, took a trompe l'oeil class from Pugh and stayed on to help.

"I think he's a creative genius. The ideas never stop coming--his color vision, his understanding of how light works. I think he's one of the top four or five muralists in the world. He's a great teacher. You learn a lot from him. Bolstered by the technical study he gives, how much better I see the world," Bryant says.



Photograph by Tsutomu Fujita

Day and Night Job: John Pugh spends a night at home drawing a layout of a mural that he will create for the Saratoga County Health Department in Florida next year. Pugh often paints in the day and draws at night.

Assistants make models of architectural elements in the mural so that they can study how shadows are cast. They have to paint straight lines and blend two colors, the two fundamentals, before they can begin to tackle any actual mural. Bryant's granddaughter, Kaetlyn Boyle, 5, was the model for the mural, a fantasy creation, in the pediatric wing at the Kaiser Hospital in Santa Clara.

As Pugh has matured as a painter, he has added more layers of complexity to his concepts, beside the added skill in execution that experience brings. "It's multiple levels, levels of deception. My concepts are getting deeper, there's more meaning to my art now. Everything is getting stronger."

A case in point a work he was commissioned to do for Victor Valley College in Victorville. "They wanted a

history of the valley for the last 150 years," he explains. The mural looks like a canvas stretched on exposed boards that appears to be unraveling. Pugh added pre history by putting Indian petroglyphs in the part that appears to be underneath.

On the portion that isn't unraveling are a pioneer, a cowboy, a wagon train, a railroad and Joshua trees with oranges attached by wily developers who were trying to sell the land. Viewers purportedly try to put the linen-looking flap back in place, succumbing to the old illusion-versus-reality paradox, a major appeal of trompe l'oeil.

With trompe l'oeil, the question also arises, Is the painter just showing off? Where does art leave off and craft begin? "The format is craft; the concept is art. It's dramatic, what I'm trying to evoke, what I'm getting at is art," is Pugh's take.

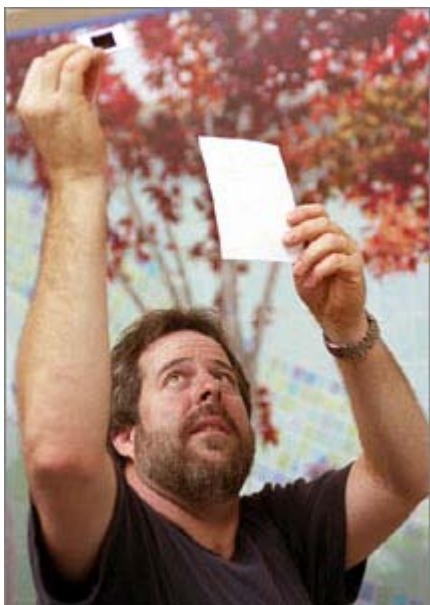
The execution of a painting is mechanical. A slide is blown up and reflected on the canvas and grids are made, then sketches, then color. These days he puts patches of color throughout the entire canvas so that the piece is able to grow organically, he can see the overall effect as it progresses.

On the studio walls is a half-finished mural for El Camino Hospital in Mountain View, which will look like a tile mosaic. "I'm learning how to paint a mosaic." The viewer has to stand close enough to the painting to see if tiles or paint are used. Yes, it is paint.

At the hospital entryway where this work will eventually hang, actual tiles are in evidence, so the real article will co-exist with the artifice, reality will merge with illusion. Art imitating life imitating art ...

Pugh enters perhaps a dozen public art competitions yearly. He's completed or is in the process of creating work for Boise, Idaho; Anchorage, Ala.; Miami, Fla.; Syracuse, N.Y.; and the California cities of Dublin, Hayward and Merced. He won the bid for a mural for

the Berryessa Community Center in San Jose.



Window to Reality: Muralist John Pugh looks at pictures of a tree, which he will duplicate in a painting.

Photograph by Tsutomu Fujita

In the 10-story mural for the state building in Syracuse, a tribute to the Erie Canal, it looks as though a steamboat is coming right through the building. Besides cities, hospitals are also drawn to his work--three will be at the Palo Alto Medical Foundation.

The mural at the Kaiser Hospital in Santa Clara shows a water garden, which Pugh describes as "meditative shapes about healing."

Private commissions account for about 10 percent of his work. He's designed a Polynesian style mural for a courtyard in a home in Maui for Saratogans Kimball and Martha Small. The mural shows a lagoon with split levels of volcanic rock and natural stones.

Pugh designed the actual courtyard for the home, with a real spa, plus a spa reflected in the mural. "I'm intrigued by his work," says Kimball Small. "I've been in redevelopment work for 20 years, and what an interesting and fun way to expand the property and wall."

For his intriguing work, the muralist uses canvas for work that will be hung inside; for outdoor work he uses a synthetic material with a protective coating.

Pugh started creating murals when he was a student at Chico State and made one for the college entryway. This gave him international exposure, which led to the Honda mural. Because he was getting work here, Pugh moved to Los Gatos in 1984, worked in various locations and built the mountain studio a year ago.

He lives with his wife, Wendy, a physical therapist at Valley Medical Center in San Jose. They've been married for seven years after meeting at a personal growth seminar in Phoenix. Pugh describes his twin brother, Howard, who works as a web designer and lives in the East Bay, as "my best friend."

Older brother Jeff has a pumping business in Boonville. Pugh's father worked for the Navy, and his mother was an occupational therapist. "We're no more dysfunctional than most families," he jests.

After his work appeared in *Time*, his website clocked 400 hits a day rather than the usual 200. He has a vacation house in Truckee and drives an SUV. Sounds like both fame and fortune are his. Or is this merely an illusion he's created?

John Pugh's website is at www.artofjohnpugh.com.
