

Published Tuesday July 29, 2008

## Research permeates city's mural

BY DANE STICKNEY  
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

When Meg Saligman climbs onto her massive scaffolding and slaps paint on a big brick wall, that's the end of the artistic process.



Meg Saligman and her team of artists recently completed a portrait of Imaya Chung, daughter of artist Richard Chung, on Saligman's evolving mural, "Fertile Ground," on the Energy Systems Inc. building in downtown Omaha.

It started months ago with hours of research and interviews.

The Philadelphia painter is creating "Fertile Ground," a 22,000-square-foot mural about Omaha on the Energy Systems Inc. building near 13th and Cass Streets. The creation will feature people, places and landscapes from Omaha's past and present.

To make sure it accurately captures the essence of Omaha, Saligman has conducted weeks of research, scouring archives, talking with local historians and interviewing an eclectic bunch of people.

Before any paint hit the 328-foot-long brick wall in late June, Saligman visited Omaha three times, beginning in March. Being an out-of-towner, she had lots to learn. But she thinks that could be a good thing because she has no bias about what the city is or isn't.

"I'm more of a vessel for the information I'm collecting," she said.

Saligman started by visiting photo and historical archives at the Durham Museum, the Douglas County Historical Society, the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center and other spots. She found insight on the city's evolution and some of the characteristics of its people. She selected photographs that would fit well in the mural.

The Peter Kiewit Foundation, which is funding the mural project, has asked Saligman and others involved to not reveal the overall design and its contents, so the evolution will surprise the community. But prominent historical figures, including construction mogul Peter Kiewit and jazz musician Preston Love, already are visible.

Of the roughly 40 or 50 people to be featured in the mural, less than half will be historical figures, Saligman said. Those who have been chosen were selected not for their prominence but for ideas or segments of the population they represent.

Kiewit, Love and others from Omaha's past have been rendered in the mural's background. Current Omahans are in the forefront. Again, Saligman wasn't searching for contemporary notable Omahans. She wanted ordinary people from different areas and representing different cultures.

She set up interview and photo sessions around the city: at a YMCA in south Omaha, a health center in the northern part of town, a basketball tournament out west and downtown at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, which is a consultant and supporter for the project.

She asked Omahans questions about the city and their connection to it. Their answers helped guide her vision for the mural. She also took about 2,000 pictures of 100 Omahans and chose the best to include in the artwork.

So far, Saligman and her team of four assistants have painted portraits of Hallie Sharkey, who works at the Film Streams theater, and local artist Richard Chung and his daughter Imaya.

Sharkey chatted with Saligman at Film Streams and attended the photo session at the Bemis. Just before painting started, she learned she'd be part of the mural. Now her portrait stretches almost the entire 70-foot height of the wall.

"I'm super-excited about it," Sharkey said. "It will be nice to see how everything integrates with the rest of the mural."

Lifetime Omahan Holly McAdams is confident it will pull together well.

"Meg has done a ton of work and research," said McAdams, who is working on the project as the Bemis' community arts program manager. "She probably knows more about the community than I do, and I've grown up here."

Saligman put in the research work because accurate details are essential for the mural.

To make sure she chose the right trees and grasses, she consulted with officials at Lauritzen Gardens. She met with a local architect to devise authentic and important buildings to include. Saligman read Willa Cather, and one of the Nebraska writer's lines — "Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world; but here the earth was the floor of the sky" — inspired her to make the sky a big part of the background.

"A major theme of the mural is the depth of the people, the depth of the land, the depth of the history," Saligman said. "Without the research, I wouldn't have known any of that."

- **Contact the writer:** 444-1220, [dane.stickney@owh.com](mailto:dane.stickney@owh.com)

Contact the Omaha World-Herald [newsroom](#)

Copyright ©2008 Omaha World-Herald®. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, displayed or redistributed for any purpose without permission from the Omaha World-Herald.