



SWVA LIVING ART



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Artists are painting the town with new murals and public art *Story by* CHRISTINA NIFONG



a

three-story high woman falls backward, shattering into pieces. The sun sets over Carvins Cove. A shimmering fish swims among a playful otter and paddling turtle.

These are moments, striking and surprising, beautiful and bucolic, captured

in paint and spread across the unlikely-est of canvases — brick and plaster and concrete.

There are more — a mockingbird flaps through a slate-gray sky, a green-haired goddess floats among healing flowers, larger-than-life students smile into city hallways, a motley collection of beloved pets poses in the grass, a tattooed witch lacquers her nails

All of them, murals painted in the Roanoke area last year.

While not yet Philadelphia or even Richmond, Roanoke's artscape is coming into its own. Murals across the city reflect an eclectic mix of styles and moods. They are small and huge, collaborative and visionary, commercial and boundary-pushing. Find them indoors and out, under highways, inside parking garages, down alleyways; in breweries and coffee shops and restaurants, adorning walls in hospitals and libraries and apartment-

building stairwells and shopping malls.

There's a convergence of factors to thank: a city budget that supports public art, downtown developers with dollars to spend on style, arts-minded citizens and civic-minded institutions all interested in creating a dynamic Roanoke vibe.

"Basically, I wanted to have beautiful eye candy where I live," says Mim Young, a graphic designer and founder of the RAMP — Roanoke Art Mural Project, who has sparked and shepherded many of the city's murals.

The result of this rise has been to increase pride and identity for neighborhoods where the works reside, to engage tourists and to telegraph to locals and visitors that Roanoke is a happening place.

"Murals — and public art in general — just enliven your city and make it place where people want to live and want to go," says Susan Jennings, Roanoke's arts and culture coordinator.

MURAL MOMENTUM

The phenomenon of color and whimsy atop Roanoke's bricks is not new.

Think: Dorothy Gillespie's dominating downtown honeycomb, the iconic Uneeda Biscuit advertisement off Jefferson Street and Coca-Cola signs that playfully peek among downtown's rooftops.

But 2002 was the year when city leaders began setting aside funding for the making of murals as part of their public art program. In 2006, the city hired Jennings and developed a plan for weaving art into its fabric.

In 2011 RAMP's Young visited her family in Miami, viewed the Wynwood Walls project there and came home on something of a mission: to give Roanoke's creativity and eclecticism an outward manifestation.

"Our walls were not conveying what a vibrant community we are to live in," she says.

By 2012, murals began popping up around the city: "The World Is a Village" facing the 7-Eleven parking lot in Grandin Village; a cave-drawing-esque stampede of gazelle beside the Taubman Art Museum; a parade of portraits dominating a hallway at Valley View Mall.

Young often collaborated with artist Scott "Toobz" Noel to create and install the works. She collected funding wherever she could — The Arts Council of the

Blue Ridge, crowdfunding, even her own bank account.

Completed in 2013, a fiery fallscape painted up the stairs and on one wall of the Garden City Recreation Center was the first of Young's projects paid for by the city.

ART, INSIDE AND OUT

A mural at the Raleigh Court Library (left) on Grandin Road was painted by Jaimie Phillips. The West End Center (below) on Patterson Avenue and 13th Street is decorated with this mural.

In 2014, Hollins University art professor Jennifer Anderson Printz kicked off a new mural project curated by the Taubman on the wall connecting Campbell Avenue with Salem Avenue. She, along with volunteers and students, stenciled a repeating pattern of a nightshade plant. Inside its lacey circles were tiny photographs taken by students from Hollins University and Ferrum College.

Within six months it had been replaced by a galloping herd of Toobz horses, the next piece in the rotating project.

How does Printz feel about the temporary nature of creating murals? "I just embrace it," she says. "It becomes this kind of time-bound, beautiful, fleeting moment."

By 2015, murals — inside and out — were regularly included in building renovations, restaurant decor and institution designs. In 2016, a 300-foot long concrete wall facing Southeast Roanoke's Dale Avenue was transformed into a wind-swept tree, featuring leaves hand painted by residents.

That same year Mexican street artist Favio "Curio" Martinez arrived for a week of splashing Latin-themed scenes across the walls of Tuco's Taqueria Garaje.

In 2017, the city commissioned its largest mural to date, 18 columns beneath the Interstate 581 overpass at the Tazewell Avenue exit, totaling 2,500 square feet and costing \$15,500.

And in 2018, more than a dozen murals — funded by the city, regional institutions, RAMP and private business owners — breathed to life in Roanoke.

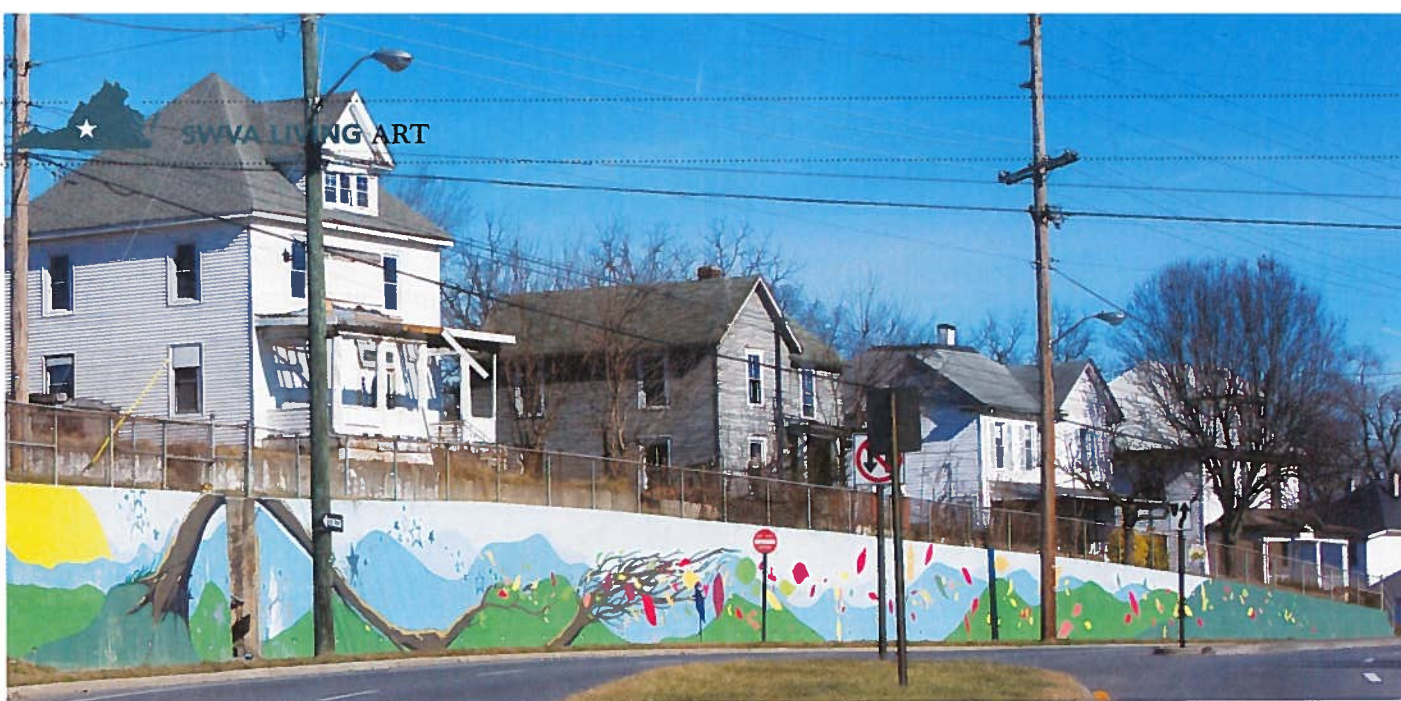
A momentum has begun that shows no signs of slowing.

MAKING OF A MURAL

The way a mural is born is different with every artist, every funder, every wall. Often it begins with a renovation, continues with a collaboration and ends with an installation. Something like this:

As the Western Virginia Water Authority renovated its downtown Roanoke headquarters in 2018, employees searched for old photos of the building. What they





found surprised them: there had been a large painted advertisement for National Business College on the side that faced First Street.

How fun, planners thought, to put a new mural in its place.

"We had seen other murals go up around Roanoke," remembers Water Authority public relations manager Sarah Baumgardner. "We loved all the different styles. We thought, 'Yeah, we can be a part of this.'"

William Byrd High School senior Ashley Roop heard the Water Authority was considering a mural, so she reached out, bringing an original acrylic painting to Baumgardner's office. Baumgardner liked what she saw. She and Ashley worked together to make changes, adding a sunset, removing fall colors.

Then Baumgardner had to figure out how to get the art onto the building. She spoke to folks at Fastsigns who suggested printing the piece on vinyl and hooking it to anchors in the wall. It would be less expensive and easier to change. Baumgardner was intrigued. But also worried.

"What if it looks bad? What if it's pixelated?" she wondered. In the end, she couldn't have been more pleased.

At 8 p.m. on Thursday, Oct. 4, installers laid out the 24-by-35-foot-canvas in the parking lot. Ashley, her parents, grandparents, brother, aunt, uncle and cousin all gathered to watch her work become a Roanoke landmark.

"It really surprised me," Ashley says. "When I saw it up there, I was like, 'Wow!'"



The night stretched into morning and though it was getting late, they vowed to stay till the end. It was, it turned out, Ashley's 18th birthday—a double celebration.

Ashley's painting is expected to last about three years. Baumgardner says as soon as the vinyl begins to fade or tear, she'll begin the process of replacing it with another student original.

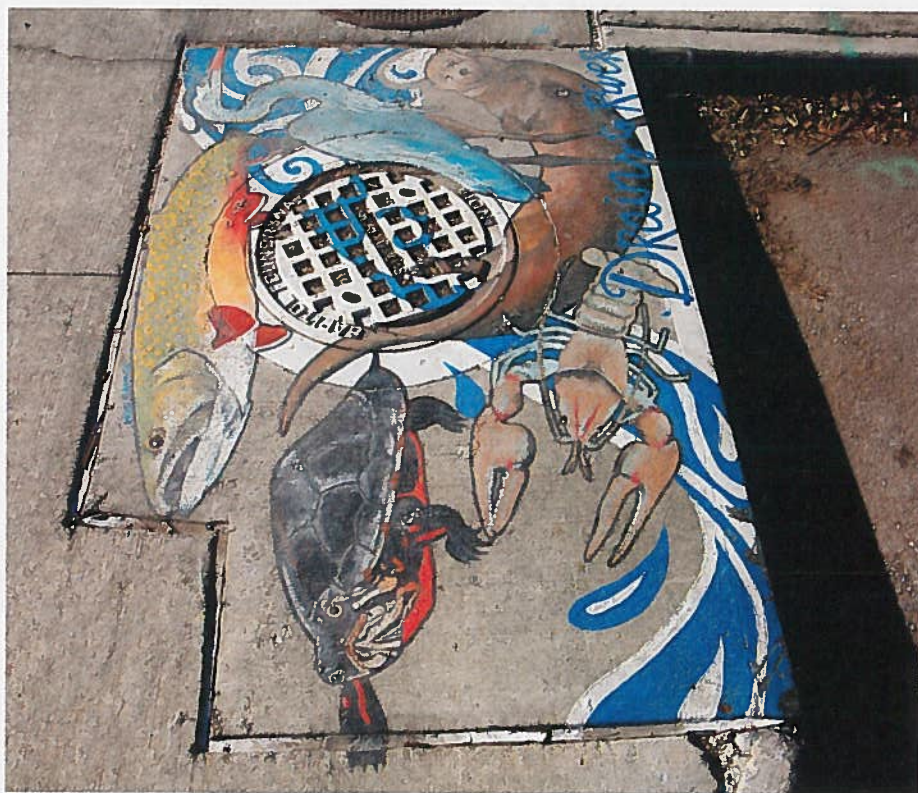
"Working with a student and encouraging them, letting them see their art ...

was really rewarding for our organization," Baumgardner says.

FUTURE MURALS

Many think Roanoke's mural magic is only set to multiply. In 2019, new murals are emerging across Southwest Virginia.

• In Christiansburg, artist Stephanie Akers sketches doe-eyed dogs and a curious goat on the side of Franklin's Taekwondo studio. For \$100 anyone can pay



MURALS MULTIPLY

The Dale Avenue community mural (top left) offers a colorful gateway from Roanoke to Vinton. William Byrd High School senior Ashley Roop painted the Western Virginia Water Authority's mural (bottom left). "Roanoke River Ragout" (top) was painted on a storm drain in Grandin Village by Ned Savage. Stephanie Akers works on a pet mural in Christiansburg.

to have a likeness of their pet added to the ongoing display as a fundraiser for Montgomery County Emergency Assistance Program. Begun last fall, Akers estimates she can include 200-300 animals on the wall; planners say the mural could spread to other surfaces if there's interest.

- Also in Christiansburg, muralist Jamie Phillips has begun work on 10 walls inside the Carilion Clinic Saint Albans Hospital. Hospital planners saw her work at the New River Valley Community Services building and asked her to beautify their space, Phillips says. Murals can be important in mental health settings, she explains, because they can brighten patients' days without introducing elements that might be dangerous — such as frames or sharp-edged sculptures.

- In Roanoke, RAMP is overseeing two new projects expected to be completed in 2019.

- Roanoke's Art by Bus program will, as in years past, feature four buses wrapped in art this spring. This year two will be covered in images from the city's permanent arts collection and two will be original works. Artist Jennifer Printz is working with her Hollins students to create several designs specifically imagined for beautifying city buses. Roanoke's Jennings calls the buses "giant murals traveling through the city."

- But confusion between business owners and city planners over whether the not-finished paintings on their buildings are commercial signs (which have size restrictions) or works of art (which do not) has stalled two murals in Old Southwest.

Who knows what agency will reach out to Jennings' office, as Stormwater department employees did last year, asking to collaborate? Or what private developer might commission a multistory mural that can be seen for blocks around? Richmond developer Bill Chapman surprised nearly everyone last year when the falling woman mysteriously appeared on the side of his West Station building.

"When I saw what Bill Chapman did, I thought, 'Oh, I hope that will catch on,'" says Jennings. "I hope that will start a ripple effect in the business community."

Only time will tell. ★



Painting For The People

Jaimie Phillips may be the closest thing Roanoke has to a muralist-in-residence

Story by CHRISTINA NIFONG

JAIMIE PHILLIPS IS NOT AFRAID OF heights. Not the kind where you sketch from atop a scaffold — or the kind where you reach for the stars.

In Roanoke, she's painted a 12-foot-tall children's waiting room and the space just below the ceiling at the Raleigh Court Branch Library. She worked 15 feet up creating a swirl of hops and mountains and music at Starr Hill Brewery, and seasonally adjusts a train tableau above the bar at The River and Rail Restaurant.

ATOP THE ART SCENE

Jaimie Phillips, 31, has painted murals all over Roanoke, as well as keeping up the seasonally changing scene above the bar at River and Rail Restaurant (above).

It's all in a day's work as a muralist.

Phillips, 31, didn't start out as an artist. She swam the 200 butterfly for Hidden Valley High School, then pondered psychology and graphic design at Old Dominion University. But a professor spotted her talent and invited her to focus on oil and brush.

Concrete and plaster haven't been her only canvases, either. In Norfolk, she created scenes of the sea and also delicate, intricate, elderly faces detailed on thin slabs of wood.

But three years ago, an explosion in the building where she rented a studio displaced her and 30 other Norfolk artists. Her community scattered. She packed up her life and headed home.

In Roanoke, Phillips was surprised to find a more vibrant scene than she had left. She rented a space at The Aurora Studio Center and painted whatever she could find — a pair of parrots at 13th

Street's Tacos Rojas, the Wake & Bacon food truck, a changing chalkboard at 16 West Marketplace.

She applied for a city-funded mural; it went to a nationally known artist. But Phillips kept in touch with Susan Jennings, Roanoke's arts and culture coordinator. When upcoming projects crossed her desk, Jennings passed along Phillips' name.

Before Phillips knew it, she was making her mark. In her most recent major commission, completed in August at the New River Valley Community Services building in Blacksburg, five oversized children twirl and explore and create across three walls totaling 100 feet.

These days Phillips lives and works in a carriage house in Old Southwest. An aquarium brings the ocean to her. She sits, a young, curly-haired Pat Benatar look-alike — leather jacket, sheer blouse, ripped jeans, red lips — beneath her stormy seascapes and funky album covers.

"I think public art is one of the most important art forms we have today," she says. "It has this ability to reach people who wouldn't walk into a museum or gallery."

"It's really important because you might inspire somebody. You might make somebody's day."

Phillips begins her creative process on a computer grid. She drops images — details she's drawn, sometimes photos she's taken of models who become her painted faces. She builds a collage of colors, shapes, motifs.

"It's how my brain works. I see it as a puzzle, fitting pieces together," she explains.

Then, when she's 12 feet up, she'll paint from a zoomed-in corner of her grid. Every day, a new quadrant, for weeks or months, until her bright, lively scenes are ready to live on without her.

Though Phillips has created in many media, it's murals that have captured her. Long-term she hopes to get her master's and begin a college-based project where she can teach future muralists and travel, creating murals wherever she goes.

"It's almost like you have a duty — as an artist — to bring a little bit of good back into the world." ★