

Muralist creating big public picture of Omaha

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Philadelphia artists Meg Saligman is creating a 22,000 square-foot mural called "Fertile Ground" on the east wall of the Energy Systems Inc. building near 13th and Cass Streets.

Meg Saligman has conflicting feelings about a big blue factory wall that stretches longer than a football field. The Philadelphia artist is creating a 22,000-square-foot mural depicting Omaha's history, present and future on the massive east wall of the Energy Systems Inc. building near 13th and Cass Streets. The Peter Kiewit Foundation is funding the project, which should be finished next spring.

Scaffolding frames Saligman's brick canvas, roughly 70 feet tall by 328 feet long. She has prepared the surface and has begun painting the rough images of a few figures. But she has nearly a year's worth of work yet to do. She's both excited by the opportunity and stressed out by its size. "It's a fun project," she said. "But it's big. Really big."

The mural, "Fertile Ground," is the brainchild of the Peter Kiewit Foundation. With help from the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, the foundation began searching for a location and artist in 2006. It identified the Energy Systems building - in north downtown near the Qwest Center Omaha and the proposed site of a new baseball stadium - as an ideal spot. The energy company agreed and turned over access to its exterior and a loading bay that now doubles as Saligman's studio.

The Peter Kiewit Foundation has been involved in a number of public art initiatives, including the J. Doe project and the installation of sculptures on the Qwest Center grounds. While the foundation wouldn't reveal the cost or the exact design of the mural, it's literally its biggest project to date, said Lyn Wallin Ziegenbein, executive director of the foundation. "We feel that this project contributes to the vitality of the community," Ziegenbein said. "It's a unification process because it ends up belonging to everyone."

Saligman has visited Omaha many times during the past year, doing historical research and interviewing civic leaders and average Omahans to help develop her idea for the mural. Public Art Review named Saligman one of the 10 most influential muralists in the nation in 2006. She has been creating the large-scale paintings for 18 years and estimates that she has painted hundreds of murals - dozens on a massive scale.

Only one of her murals - in Shreveport, La. - is bigger than the Omaha project. When the Omaha mural is complete, Saligman said it is likely to be one of the three biggest in the country. The creation process involves two techniques. One requires that paint be applied directly to the wall, and the other involves painting on fabric and adhering it to the building. When it's finished, the mural should last for more than 30 years. Saligman and four other artists plan to paint until late fall. She estimates that the mural will be about 70 percent finished by then. The team will return in the early spring and, weather permitting, finish by next June. Foundation officials have asked the artist not to reveal the design, which was created by Saligman and approved by the foundation. They prefer the public to gradually see the mural take shape.

Some features are already visible. Two people — a worker at Film Streams and a father who will be playing with his daughter — are realistically rendered. The "Road to Omaha" sculpture outside Rosenblatt Stadium also has been portrayed on the wall. Saligman has more surprises in mind. Her goal is to reference the depth of character, history and landscape in Omaha, as well as the city's vibrant future.

"It's about the past, present and future," she said. "There are a lot of possibilities in Omaha, and I think the mural will capture that."