

[HOME](#) / [A & E](#) / [VISUAL ARTS](#) /

Street science

Mural project seeks to engage the public

BY VICTORIA DAVIS

NOVEMBER 14, 2019

[RSS](#)



VICTORIA DAVIS

“Diversity of Scientists,” a mural by celebrated artist Melanie Stimmell Van Latum (left), honors unsung researchers like paleontologist Mary Anning.

Gliding thick brushes covered in browns, pinks, blues and silver across white walls, Melanie Stimmell Van Latum gives off a Bob Ross-like aura as she tackles her newest mural project. It’s study time at the Discovery Building, and all is quiet, except for the sounds of dripping man-made waterfalls and the splashing of the artist cleaning her acrylic-caked brushes.

“It’s looking pretty vintage right now with a more renaissance baroque style, but soon we’ll get to the fun stuff where everything is colorful and 3D,” says Van Latum. “But I also had to start with Mary Anning [an English paleontologist], because she’s my favorite.”

The mural, “Diversity of Scientists,” features a vibrant, multi-hued, graffiti-style collage of 10 lesser-known scientific leaders, including Persian mathematician Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi; the first Native American female doctor, Susan LaFlesche Picotte; U.S. computer scientist and Navy officer Grace Hopper; and African American physicist Edward Bouchet. The mural is part of a larger project called “Science to Street Art.”

“We’re changing the story of science to be more inclusive, welcoming and engaging to communities that haven’t been engaged with this building or science before,” says Ginger Ann Contreras, executive director of the Illuminating Discovery Hub at the Wisconsin Institute for Discovery. “This is a colorful way for voices to be heard.”

Contreras hopes that five big, bright murals on science themes will spark curiosity about science. Meadowood Shopping Center will feature two murals behind the Meadowridge Library based on astrophysics and the periodic table. A molecular structure mural will be at Madison’s Metropolitan Sewerage District, Pumping Station 8. The fifth mural, on the theme of big data and precision medicine, is already brightening the outside of Luna’s Groceries.

“Precision Medicine” and “Diversity of Scientists” are the only murals completed so far. Weather permitting, Contreras says the remaining three murals will be installed by late November. Otherwise, the project could continue into the spring.

The collaborative initiative has a three-fold goal: making science more approachable and engaging, educating the Madison community on the value of hip-hop culture and art, and promoting public art in underrepresented neighborhoods and communities.

“If people don’t see people like them in scientific representations, they might automatically assume this field isn’t for them,” says Contreras, who studied bioarchaeology. “Public art should be about connecting community culture and being recognized. If you’re not seeing yourself within the public art, what message is that sending about the city you’re living in?”

Contreras spearheaded the project last year, contacting scientists and mural artists across the U.S. and pairing them to help bring these murals to life.

VICTORIA DAVIS



A design sketch for the mural installed in the Discovery Building.

“Art is integral to good science communication — plus, it’s just really cool,” says Dave Lovelace, a research scientist at the UW Geology Museum who helped brainstorm ideas for subjects for the “Diversity of Scientists” mural. “When you study physics, who do you hear about? Einstein, Galileo, Newton — all bearded, old, white men. But that doesn’t capture the whole story. Like how mathematics stemmed out of the Arab countries.”

“It’s why I hate *Big Bang Theory*,” adds Laura J. Knoll, a professor of medical microbiology and immunology at UW-Madison who also assisted with the mural. “All the scientists are white, geeky men. That’s not what my lab is like at all.”

“Science to Street Art” is also about empowering young people in underrepresented communities. The project partnered with Madison’s local middle schools — Spring Harbor, Black Hawk and Cherokee — to have Van Latum lead 3D chalk mural workshops in the science classes. Contreras, who attended Madison West High School, grew up steeped in hip-hop culture. She understands the negative stigma associated with graffiti street art, and has also experienced the struggle of trying to make her way in the science world as a non-white woman.

“When you’re a person of color and you want to excel in education, there are a lot of barriers, like systematic oppression of how things are taught, learning in a different language than you

may speak at home and not seeing people in advanced classes who look like you,” says Contreras. “These challenges can add up to this weight that you’re carrying around with you that makes it difficult to just sit and learn.”

Peter Krsko is one of the two artists creating the periodic table mural, which has the chemical compounds of cartoon sharks, fish, butterflies and avocados cascading across a rainbow backdrop. “It’s nice when we are painting and the neighborhood kids come up to us, ask what we are painting, and suddenly become a lot more interested in chemistry,” Krsko says. “Even if the conversation is 30 seconds, we’re waking up interest in these young minds.”

“The murals that these artists are designing are quite arresting with their use of color and form,” adds Jo Handelsman, director of Wisconsin Institute for Discovery. “I do especially love the mural in our building because it’s the diversity of ideas and the diversity of people that make science have its power and potency.”

[SCIENCE](#)[VISUAL ART](#)[UW-MADISON](#)[PUBLIC ART](#)[MURALS](#)

RSS

COMMENTS

RELATED

Creating Mural Alley

The backside of the East Side Shopping Center undergoes a dramatic transformation, from somewhat sketchy to bright and welcoming. The opening ceremony of “Mural Alley” is a vibrant celebration of one of Madison’s underserved communities.

AUG 23, 2018

BENJAMIN ZASTROW



Taking up space

She's not in Kansas anymore. Jenie Gao has become one of Madison's most well-known printmakers and muralists.

MAY 23, 2019

LATASIA DHAMI

Art for the ages

Planning the Monroe Street reconstruction meant paying attention to public art. By next spring, the street will have poetry in the sidewalks, mosaics by Marcia Yapp and sculptures by Harry Whitehorse and William Turnbull.

OCT 25, 2018

CAROLYN FATH

NEWS

News
Cover Stories
Snapshot
Madweek

OPINION

Opinion
Citizen Dave
Savage Love
Cartoons
Tell All
Feedback

FOOD & DRINK

Reviews
Beer
Behind the Brews
Food News
Food for Thought
Car to Table
Restaurant Directory
Isthmus Dining
Isthmus Drinks

A & E

Visual Arts
Books
Comedy
Emphasis
Stage

MUSIC

Music Calendar
Isthmus Live Sessions
Vinyl Cave
Picks Playlists

SCREENS

Movies
TV & Video
Games

EVENTS

Calendar
Isthmus Picks
Isthmus Events
Photo Galleries



Isthmus is © 2019 Red Card Media | All rights reserved | Madison, WI | USA | [CONTACT](#) | [CLASSIFIEDS](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#)

Built with [Metro Publisher™](#)