

HOME AS CANVAS

News flash: White walls are boring. The time has come to combat chromophobia and think big, bold and exciting

Why walls are made for murals



Floorworks in Toronto has local artists create murals (such as this one by Esther Choi) for its store walls. TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



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As a child, I thought that walls were an invitation to play. I still do. So when I design colour for people who have an anxiety attack over a quart of colour here or a block of it there, I want to get out a spray can and scrawl across their often colourless planes: "LET'S START HAVING SOME FUN HERE - NOW!"

Ever since prehistoric times, when humans scratched images of bison on caves, walls have been embraced as an artistic opportunity. Pompeians, who polished their red, marble-dusted walls until they shone, liked to add a few judiciously placed pornographic images. Medieval basilicas were covered from top to bottom with colourful images that told biblical stories. And in the Renaissance, Pope Julius II gave a temperamental Michelangelo carte blanche on

the Sistine Chapel ceiling while Raphael and his apprentices frescoed the walls down the hall.

Then the Protestant Reformation came along with its colour-is-bad and white-is-good attitude. Before wall colour became cheap at the end of the 19th century, anyone who was wealthy enough enjoyed covering their walls with rich materials or decorative detail in fashionable hues. When paint in countless colours and wallpaper in numerous styles were affordable to all, fewer wanted them.

Today, walls are too often left like a blank canvas begging to be used for something more exciting than holding up the ceiling. And this is why it is a welcome treat to check out the huge wall murals in the window of Toronto's Floorworks (365 Dupont St., www.floorprint.org), a company that specializes in environmentally responsible flooring and carpets.

Four years ago, owner Brian Greenberg decided that he wanted to give something back to the street (a street he describes as one of the ugliest in the city). So he hired local artists to use the two 14-foot-

tall walls inside the front window as their canvas.

Now, Fraser Greenberg, Brian's son, organizes new commissions three or four times a year. Artists are given \$1,000, the paint and one weekend to do a mural. The artists are shown the collections of furniture, carpet or flooring that will be on display only in order to trigger ideas. They are not expected to change their style to suit the product. The Greenbergs say they have never been disappointed with the results. The only sad thing is seeing a mural they really love, like a woman's head with birds by artist Ryan Dineen, go at the end of its time.

Fraser will have the same problem in his current one-room student digs, where artist Aaron Li-Hill is painting a mural on three of the walls. When asked whether the landlord might have a problem with it, he says it will be way better than the ugliness that was there before - a blue ceiling and dreary, dark green walls. And what was the direction he gave Li-Hill? "Do whatever is cool. Fantasy, women and lots of colour."

The staff at Floorworks will share artists' contact informa-

tion with clients or passersby who, inspired by a piece, sometimes want their own walls transformed. Queen Street artist Mike Parsons, known for his black-and-white cartoon-style art (viewable at www.heyapathy.com), elicited a lot of interest when his work appeared two years ago.

To connect with new artists, Fraser is exploring links to the Ontario College of Art & Design, but for now artists come in every month asking for a chance to decorate the walls. This is how Esther Choi (www.estherchoi.com), a Toronto artist studying architectural theory at Harvard, came to create the graphic mural currently on display at Floorworks. Fraser has also spotted graffiti artists whose style he likes and traced them through their tag. Graffiti Alley just south of Queen Street from Spadina to Portland is like a gallery for street artists working in a wide range of styles.

Style in Progress (www.styleinprogress.ca), an organization that handles graffiti and hip hop events across the country, also puts interested parties in touch with local graffiti artists such as Angel Carrillo, a.k.a. Cruz1 (cruz1designs@gmail.com). Carrillo

paints on everything from fabric and skin to a child's bedroom, the side of a house or a bridge over Wilson Boulevard for the City of Toronto. Commissions range from around \$500 to \$2,000 plus materials and never take more than a week.

With so many talented artists around and so many white walls just waiting to be embraced, isn't it time to go big, bold and exciting? What is the worst that can happen? Another artist changes it up later on?

Perhaps we should do what Parsons's school did after he brought in a gallon of red paint and used it to add some pizzazz to the white corridors. The custodian handed him a can of white. When he had painted out the red, Parsons used what was left of the white to scrawl the word "boring" inconspicuously over the walls of the school. Maybe my chromophobic clients would find that a more subtle response to their colour hesitations.

» Janice Lindsay, an interior colour and design consultant, is writing *The Idea of Colour for McClelland & Stewart*. 416-961-6281, www.pinkcolouranddesign.com

Hitting the wall

» Before committing to a muralist, check out as many portfolios in person or online as you can to pinpoint a style that appeals to you. When you find a painter that you like, discuss potential subjects or concepts within his or her genre until it feels like a meeting of minds.

» Prior to any work beginning, work out a budget. Final costs will vary according to the size and complexity of a painting and whether any scaffolding will be required. Toronto artist Aaron Li-Hill, for instance, doesn't have a fixed rate, but has charged as much as \$8,000 for a complicated mural.

» If you're commissioning interior work, book the artist for a time when windows can be left open for two days to ventilate fumes. If the artist is using spray paint, suggest that he or she employ one of the least toxic brands, such as Montana from Germany.

» If you're taking the DIY route, "graffiti stores" such as Bomb Shelter in downtown Toronto (416-203-6676) have the widest selection of mural supplies and are also good places to network with other artists.

Artist file

Aaron Li-Hill of Toronto has painted and exhibited in Australia and is currently completing studies at the Ontario College of Art and Design. He cites Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele and Alfons Mucha among his influences and likes to do murals about night scenes, trees and the female figure. Li-Hill's works are posted at www.aaronli-hilldeviantart.com and he can be reached at a_li_hill@hotmail.com.

The work of Mike Parsons, whose specialty is a back-and-white cartoon style, can be viewed at www.heyapathy.com. He can be contacted at his studio at 416-928-1229.

Ryan Dineen, a Toronto-based graffiti artist, painter and illustrator, specializes in boldly coloured portraits. His work can be viewed at www.ryandineenart.com.

» J.L.