

BRIGHT SIGNS IN MIDTOWN

Local artists create murals for Detroit's new Whole Foods

By Julie Hinds
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Midtown Detroit has a new splash of vibrancy from the murals just installed on the exterior of the new Whole Foods Market.

A bold assortment of objects — a banana, a giant fish, a woman on a bike and a cartoony version of the Penobscot Building among them — spills forth exuberantly in the mural by Detroit artist Jerome Ferretti.

Slightly farther down the block, Brighton artist Katherine Larson's mural is a lovingly realistic painting of three generations of women working in a lush vegetable garden, with the Detroit skyline in the distance.

Ferretti and Larson's murals were installed this week on the John R side of the natural and organic foods supermarket on Mack Avenue, which officially opens at 9 a.m. June 5. The outdoor artwork is scheduled to be completed today with the addition of two murals by

Tylonn Sawyer of Detroit and Mathew Sharum of Dearborn, which will be located there those by Ferretti and Larson.

This huge quartet of creativity is one of many touches meant to symbolize the well-known company's commitment to a city that has been sorely underserved for decades by major grocery stores.

"We wanted the store to reflect the city of Detroit on the inside and the outside in every way possible," says Amanda Musilli, community liaison for Whole Foods Market. "The art murals represent another way the store is a reflection of the community."

About 100 artists submitted proposals for the project. Sixteen finalists and their ideas were unveiled at an event in December during Midtown's Noel Night celebration. The panel of local art-scene experts and civic representatives that chose them didn't know their identities before that evening.

The process continued until

four winners were chosen. They each received \$1,000 for supplies and \$7,500 for the commission, according to Musilli.

The content of the murals is inspired by the store's motto: "Whole Foods. Whole People. Whole Planet." But the artworks also are very personalized with Motor City references.

Larson's painting, for instance, includes two smiling children who are based on two real-life students from the nearby Spain Elementary School, which focuses on performing arts.

Ferretti put his wife, Sheila O'Brien, on the label of a huge bottle. The portion where a woman works in a garden was inspired by the Spirit of Hope urban farm in Corktown, where he's a longtime resident.

"I love it," says Red Elk Banks, executive coordinator for Whole Foods Michigan and Indiana, of the project. "It's a real honor that these artists are allowing their work to grace our building."

The artists had to do their work on 10 individual panels that would become murals more than 12 feet high. One of the challenges, according to Larson, was joining the four corners together so the paintings flowed seamlessly.

Ferretti placed his panels sideways in his studio so that he could stack two on top of each other. "I'm the artist, so whatever I do is right," he jokes.

The multi-paneled pieces are coated with a clear sealant to help them withstand the elements, says Musilli.

Those who've seen the murals already expect they will have an impact. Says Fran Dent, a jazz/blues vocalist and humorist who lives in the neighborhood and has befriended Larson. "I think it is a very positive spirit for Midtown Detroit."

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Brighton artist Katherine Larson shows off the mural she created at Whole Foods. Her work depicts three generations of women working in a garden.



Larson used Spain Elementary School students Nadia Johnson and Avant Jones as models for her mural. PHOTOS BY ANDRE J. JACKSON/DETROIT FREE PRESS