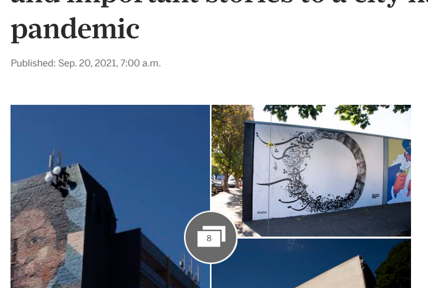
Set weather
OREGONLIVE The Oregonian
Subscribe now Sign in
Fact-first journalism when you need it most. Subscribe to OregonLive.
Advertisement
BeenVerified
People Search
First Name
Enter First Name
Last Name
Start Search
Enter First Name

SUBSCRIBER EXCLUSIVE

# Portland's new murals bring moments of beauty and important stories to a city haunted by a pandemic

Published: Sep. 20, 2021, 7:00 a.m.



Murals in Portland in the pandemic

441 shares

By Lizzy Acker | The Oregonian/OregonLive

First, the world shut down. Then came the paint.

Since the coronavirus pandemic began in early 2020, the number of visible painted murals has exploded throughout Portland. Many of those murals weren't meant to last, painted on plywood by volunteer muralists whose bigger commercial projects had been canceled along with everything else.

Initially, the boards were there to protect windows and doors for businesses shuttered by the pandemic. Then, even more went up during last year's downtown protests.

Advertisement
Watch the ceremony www.oregonlive.com/topworkplaces/
TOP WORK PLACES 2021
SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS
Fisher Investments
First Tech
uscellular

Now, as the pandemic stares down a second year, some permanent mural work is coming back. And those murals are bringing art, and important stories, outside in a city that remains constrained by a global pandemic.

"When the pandemic hit, we had a major decline in work," said Tiffany Conklin, executive director of Portland Street Art Alliance. "We had over $70,000 in projects canceled within about seven days. That was a pretty major blow for us."

Portland Street Art Alliance is a nonprofit with a mission to fill the streets with artwork while supporting local artists.

The group also helps businesses and properties get murals on their buildings, overseeing logistics, matching businesses with artists, and generally making sure projects happen and artists get paid.

After the pandemic shut down most commercial work, Conklin said, she was worried the nonprofit would have to close its doors.

But then, she said, Portlanders came through.

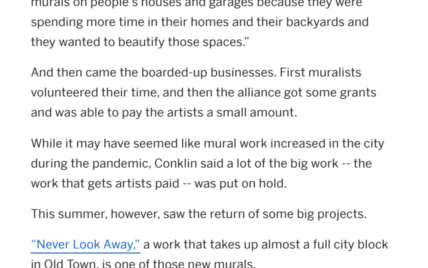
"Thankfully," Conklin said, "private people stepped up and we started getting a couple small commissions for things like murals on people's houses and garages because they were spending more time in their homes and their backyards and they wanted to beautify those spaces."

And then came the boarded-up businesses. First muralists volunteered their time, and then the alliance got some grants and was able to pay the artists a small amount.

While it may have seemed like mural work increased in the city during the pandemic, Conklin said a lot of the big work -- the work that gets artists paid -- was put on hold.

This summer, however, saw the return of some big projects.

"Never Look Away," a work that takes up almost a full city block in Old Town, is one of those new murals.



"Never Look Away," at the North Park Blocks, Northwest Broadway and Couch Street. Sept. 13, 2001. Beth Nakamura/Staff

The project, supported by Pride Northwest and Portland Street Art Alliance, has been in the works since before the pandemic began.

According to Debra Porta, executive director for Pride Northwest, the coronavirus pandemic initially slowed down work on the project. This summer, with the help of a big crew, the mural was completed.

The project was spearheaded by Zoe Piliafas and the art itself was mainly designed by Cassandra Swan. The mural celebrates queer icons from Oregon and elsewhere.

"When people in our community, whether they're out or not or whether they recognize it or not, when they look up at that mural we want them to see themselves," Porta said. "We want them to see real people who made real change."

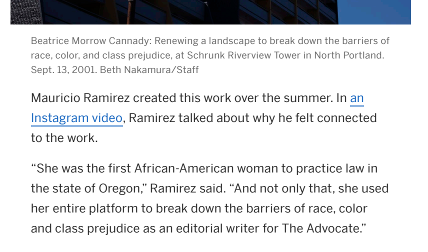
Those people include nationally known figures such as Marsha P. Johnson, as well as Oregon-based activists such as Kathleen Saadat and Asa Wright.

Porta said planners wanted to stay away from the idea of "heroes," and instead focus on the idea that these people weren't being put on a pedestal but instead were celebrated for the actual work they did.

Pride Northwest hopes to make the mural a tool to help teach LGBTQ+ history. Porta said putting the mural where it is, next to the North Park Blocks at Northwest Broadway and Couch, is important to the mission of the project.

"It's very visible," she said. "And it's right in the core of a lot of queer Portland. There's a lot of history in that area."

Another new mural working to tell the story of a person who did real work to make change is a little harder to find, but no less dramatic: the Beatrice Morrow Cannady mural overlooking the Willamette River in St. Johns on the Schrunk Riverview Tower.



Beatrice Morrow Cannady: Renewing a landscape to break down the barriers of race, color, and class prejudice, at Schrunk Riverview Tower in North Portland. Sept. 13, 2001. Beth Nakamura/Staff

Mauricio Ramirez created this work over the summer. In an Instagram video, Ramirez talked about why he felt connected to the work.

"She was the first African-American woman to practice law in the state of Oregon," Ramirez said. "And not only that, she used her entire platform to break down the barriers of race, color and class prejudice as an editorial writer for The Advocate."

Cannady moved to Oregon in 1912, where she became an assistant editor of The Advocate, a newspaper founded by her husband Edward Daniel Cannady. When she graduated from Northwestern College of Law in 1922 at age 33, she became the first Black woman in Oregon to graduate from law school. Later, she became the first Black woman in Oregon to practice law.

She is remembered also for her powerful editorial work and as a founding member of Portland's NAACP. She died in 1974 in Los Angeles, and an elementary school in Damascus bears her name.

The mural is of Cannady's face in a geometric design, with blues and greens, trees mountains and water, reflecting the landscape it is part of.

It rises over five stories at the top of an 11-story subsidized housing building on North Syracuse Street. The building is operated by Home Forward and houses seniors and people with disabilities.

While "Never Look Away" takes up a block in the center of the city and cannot be missed, the towering Cannady mural is high up on a building on a residential street near Cathedral Park. You might not even know what you're missing if you walk by and don't look up.

That's part of the nature of Portland's murals -- they are surprising and each one has a story that goes well beyond what you can see.

And they are constantly changing -- going up, coming down.

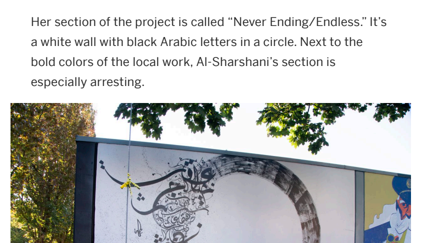
People always want to map them, Conklin said, and she says go for it. But don't expect Portland Street Art to help. That would have to be someone's full-time job.

Instead, Portland Street Art Alliance is interested in putting work wherever they can, and supporting as many artists as they can.

Take for example a project on the inner East side of the river called "The Whitney Blocks."

Two walls here feature 16 artists, including Qatari calligraphy artist Fatima Al-Sharshani, who came to Portland as part of a Qatari art program. For about a week and a half in August, Al-Sharshani worked alongside local artists as part of Portland Street Art Alliance's community art project.

Her section of the project is called "Never Ending/Endless." It's a white wall with black Arabic letters in a circle. Next to the bold colors of the local work, Al-Sharshani's section is especially arresting.



Qatari artist Fatima Al-Sharshani's "The Never Ending You" is part of a wrap around series of murals at Southeast. 10th and 11th Avenues. Sept. 13, 2021 Beth Nakamura/Staff

Over email, Al-Sharshani said she focused on the beauty and curves of Arabic letters, "something the Western eye is not as used to seeing in an artistic format."

"The Arabic language needs to be seen for its complicated beauty, and I hope that's what my mural has achieved," she said. "The mural is essentially an expression of continuity and infinity, represented abstractly by the circle."

She said she hoped people viewed the work up close to see the detail and then from a distance, where, she said, "I hope the viewer is able to lose themselves in the beauty of the curves and arcs."

The mural, on a corner of Southeast 11th Avenue and Alder Street, will certainly be seen by plenty of drivers who whiz by, as well as pedestrians and those living in nearby buildings and on the street.

People who live outdoors participate in Portland's mural projects in other ways as well. Portland Street Art Alliance works with Ground Score, a group that hires houseless people to prepare wall mural projects, including the Whitney Blocks.

The art in all these projects is meant to be enjoyed on multiple levels and by anyone.

"We choose primarily to do public art because it's a very open and accessible and democratic form of art," Conklin said. "It's for everyone to enjoy. It's for the public. It's for the city. It's very different from museums and galleries where not everyone has access to art."

As the pandemic continues, creating beautiful works that tell important stories isn't just an aesthetic diversion for viewers, it can be a lifesaving reminder that sequestered in our homes, behind masks and six feet apart, we aren't alone.

"When the pandemic hit and we had to cancel Pride in 2020 our greatest concern was, 'What does it look like for our community to not be visible?'" Porta said.

"It's our power in numbers," she said, "that helps bring about our safety."

"With the pandemic, it's very easy to hide or be hidden," she said, "and the mural allows us to have that visibility and that presence in spite of it."

**Details:**

**"Never Look Away,"** produced by Zoe Piliafas and designed by Cassandra Swan, Northwest Couch Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue.

**"Beatrice Morrow Cannady,"** by Mauricio Ramirez, 8832 N. Syracuse St.

**"Never Ending/Endless,"** by Fatima Al-Sharshani, corner of Southeast 11th Avenue and Alder Street

-- Lizzy Acker

503-221-8052, lacker@oregonian.com, @lizzyacker

Note to readers: if you purchase something through one of our affiliate links we may earn a commission.

Advertisement
SAMSUNG
Get a free Galaxy Z Flip3 5G on us
with 24 mo. bill credits and eligible trade-in on a Magenta MAX rate plan
BUY NOW
T Mobile

Recommended for You
5 tips for Business Owners to Manage Their Cash Flow
Square CLICK HERE
Dear Doctor: Should someone on the verge of osteoporosis take calcium...
OregonLive.com
Roofers Tested 17 Gutter Guards... Here's What They Discovered
LeafFilter Partner Learn More
Woman killed in Clackamas County crash, police say
OregonLive.com
New Nissan's Finally On Sale
All Things Auto | Search Ads
Readers respond: Do something, Portland leaders
OregonLive.com
Promoted Links by Taboola

Advertisement
SAMSUNG
Get a free Galaxy Z Flip3 5G on us
with 24 mo. bill credits and eligible trade-in on a Magenta MAX rate plan
BUY NOW
T Mobile

Around the Web
Taboola Feed
Roofers Tested 17 Gutter Guards... Here's What They Discovered
LeafFilter Partner | Sponsored
The New Face Mask That's Sweeping America
The Perfect Balance of Protection, Durability, & Comfort
Health News Today™ | Sponsored
Blaze Grills On Sale
BBQ Grills | sponsored sear... | Sponsored
New Nissan's Finally On Sale
All Things Auto | Search Ads | Sponsored
7 Discounts Seniors Only Get If They Ask
The Wallet Watcher | Sponsored
Don't buy Progressive glasses before reading this
We have changed the game when it comes to buying prescription ...
GlassesUSA.com | Sponsored
New Kia's Finally On Sale
All Things Auto | Sponsored
New Shaftless Stair Lifts takes Only Hours to Install- See H...
Stair Lifts | Search Ads | Sponsored
If Your Dog Eats Dry Food (Most Dog Owners Don't Kn...
Ultimate Pet Nutrition | Sponsored
These Cars Are So Loaded It's Hard to Believe They're So Cheap
New cars are selling for a fraction of their value!
Luxury SUVs | Search Ads | Sponsored
Most Affordable Camper Vans
Camper Van Warehouse | sp... | Sponsored
Users say these $29 gummies ease pain so well they 'only...
Smart People Use This Instead
Health Alert | Sponsored
Woman killed in Clackamas County crash, police say
OregonLive.com
Readers respond: Do something, Portland leaders
OregonLive.com

ADVANCE LOCAL
Registration on or use of this site constitutes acceptance of our User Agreement, Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement, and Your California Privacy Rights (User Agreement updated 1/1/21. Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement updated 5/1/2021).
Cookies Settings
© 2021 Advance Local Media LLC. All rights reserved (About Us).
The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Advance Local.
Community Rules apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site.
Ad Choices