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Muralists dress up walls in Norfolk arts district

A case of dueling murals?

Midday Thursday, artist Nick Kuszyk was nearly one-fifth into covering a 100-foot-long wall of Bob's Gun Shop on Norfolk's Granby Street in Op Art, fool-the-eye stripe patterns.

Two blocks away, at Grace St. Grill, another professional muralist, Hamilton Glass, was fleshing out his Blackbeard design on the eatery's 65-foot-long, one-story wall.

It was as if someone pulled a trigger and said "Go!" Both artists started on Tuesday. Both have been laboring like mad. Both hope to finish this weekend.

And both were commissioned through a volunteer art committee associated with the Downtown Arts and Design District recently established north of Brambleton Avenue.

"We're not dueling," Glass said, taking a break at the grill's counter.

He paused. "Nick is a really good friend."

He and Kuszyk are veteran muralists with art cred in Richmond, which has been pushing murals recently as a way to uplift downtrodden sections of the city.

Glass may get out of Norfolk sooner, because he expects to finish Saturday. Kuszyk said on Thursday he may need another week, and a few more helpers.

He had sketched on a more detailed design than he had intended. "I sort of created a monster," he said, smiling. "But it's more fun. This is my favorite thing in the world."

The art committee timed these projects so that new art would bloom within blocks of the Chrysler Museum of Art by the time it reopens May 10. Additional public art projects are in the works.

Kuszyk's design is based on the so-called dazzle patterns used on battleships during World War I: Ships were painted with geometric designs that made them a more difficult target. He chose that pattern, which he has used elsewhere, because of the local military presence.

He said he would paint the dazzle before deciding where to put his signature robot characters.

"I've been doing these guys for 14 years. They come from my past," said Kuszyk, who said it would take too long to explain what the robots mean to him. "They have generated a pretty sustainable career."

While he and his assistant worked on the art, the gun shop's owner, Robert Marcus, popped out for a look, and liked what he saw.

"I think everyone in the arts district is excited about what's going on, and we wanted to be part of it," Marcus said.

He paid for the mural. He liked all the finalists, he said, "but this was the most exciting one."

Wayne Showers, the restaurant's owner, is paying for Glass's materials, which chiefly consist of paint, and the Downtown Norfolk Council is footing the artist's fee, according to a committee member.

Glass's mural will depict one of the best-known pirates of all time, Blackbeard, who was killed in 1718 on Ocracoke Island on North Carolina's Outer Banks. Afterward, his head was stuck on a pole on the waterfront in Hampton.

By Thursday, he had painted Blackbeard's head and created a geometric pattern for the background. He had not yet resolved how to let viewers know the main character is the famed pirate.

His style? "I guess some would call it street art. I cringe when I say that. It's just not a traditional mural," he said.

"It's more urban. It's more new."

Glass, 32, has a degree in architecture from Hampton University. He lives in Richmond, where he has painted about 20 murals since 2010 and 10 or so others elsewhere.

Kuszyk lives in Brooklyn, N.Y. He's received about 15 mural commissions since 2004.

Murals are becoming more popular, Kuszyk said, because it's an affordable way to improve a homely stretch.

Glass, over at the grill, said "it's something cities are resorting to now to pick up the spirits of neighborhoods."

Regarding Norfolk, he said, "it's kind of great to be here right now. I feel like Richmond was in the same position a couple of years ago, and now the Richmond art scene is booming."

Much of it, he said, due to murals.

Teresa Annas, 757-446-2485, teresa.annas@pilotonline.com [1]

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