

Madonna mural: Downtown Salt Lake City painting is catching eyes, lifting spirits

By Peggy Fletcher Stack The Salt Lake Tribune

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The Virgin Mary is living large on the side of the old Guthrie Bicycle building, a model of tranquility on a busy downtown Salt Lake City street.

Standing 44 feet high and staring up at the mountains from the wall at 160 E. 200 South, "Ave Maria" was created in November by a pair of world-famous mural artists who go by El Mac and Retna.

For one grueling week of wind, rain and snow, the two furiously emptied 80 cans of spray paint onto the brick wall, bringing to life an exquisite image of the iconic Catholic madonna, including a burning sacred heart and Latin words from the "Hail Mary" prayer.

"I like it because it isn't offensive -- and shouldn't be -- but, at the same time, it is a little outside what people would expect," says El Mac, whose real name is Miles MacGregor. "I am aware of Utah's large Mormon population and didn't want to do something that could be taken in a bad way or offend people. But I did want people to stop and think."

Both street artists were raised Catholic and have incorporated aspects of that faith into their work. They also are interested in Russian history and religious symbolism.

Phoenix-based MacGregor began spray-painting female portraits on freight trains, but has since moved to walls in Denmark, Sweden, Italy, Spain, France, Korea and Canada.

Retna, a Los Angeles resident whose real name is Marquis Lewis, started adding halos and other embellishments to fashion posters in big cities as a way to transform those women into more spiritual beings.

The two joined forces in 2005 and have since completed works in Milan, Mexico and Miami. Neither had been to Utah before, and both were surprised and pleased to find such openness to their artistic

expressions in a conservative, Mormon-dominated state.

For connoisseurs such as Corey Bullough, their edgy but soothing work fit perfectly with his vision of Salt Lake City's young and increasingly diverse art scene.

Bullough, co-owner of FICE, an urban chic boutique in the old Guthrie building, commissioned the piece after a stroll through Temple Square. The shopkeeper, who was reared Mormon, noted how many males were depicted there -- Brigham Young, Joseph Smith, current LDS prophets, even God the Father and Jesus.

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He wanted viewers to know it was that Mary, not just another beautiful woman, so he asked MacGregor to incorporate a sacred heart in his portrayal. The two debated how best to do that for some 18 months before the artists came to Utah. Originally, the plan called for a more traditional heart, but they opted instead for an anatomically correct heart that would combine the old with the new.

"I wanted it to mean something to people," Bullough says.

Apparently, it does.

"I'm not Catholic, but I see it and it just makes me feel good," says Carrie Eldredge, FICE store manager. "We live in such a patriarchal community, so to see that maternal image is special. On the most basic institutional level, it evokes a feeling that is warm and safe."

Churchgoers at nearby First United Methodist Church also love the mural.

One woman told MacGregor she hoped the painting would reinvigorate the area and bring new energy to their congregation. The pair also received an e-mail from United Methodist's leaders, saying how grateful they were for the piece.

Church members like "the nonwhite image of Mary," says the Rev. Eun-sang Lee, First Methodist's pastor. "One woman thought Mary was Hispanic and another one thought she was Lebanese. They saw themselves in her image, and that's how it should be. They all liked the mythical, cosmic image of the divine."

Lee appreciates a reminder of "the feminine side of the divine that connects us to the Source of Life and Compassion that holds the universe together," he says. "It takes me to a place we often forget."

As they painted, scores of young Salt Lakers showed up to watch the internationally acclaimed artists at work, and shoppers at nearby Gallenson's Gun Shop stopped to comment on the emerging image.

"Gallenson's has a very different clientele than we do," says FICE manager Eldredge. "And even they were super excited about it."

Both artists hope their giant Mary, which they generously completed for a mere \$5,000, will become an urban Utah landmark.

"In a city where you have a lot of people living, the more examples you have of public art, whether statues or murals, create a sense of identity or place," MacGregor says. "In a way, it becomes yours, theirs and everyone else's."

The one-time graffiti artist brings the same kind of reverence to these massive art projects as others employ in religious worship.

"I want to do something timeless," he says. "If just for a moment, it brightens someone's day or improves someone's mood or inspires someone. That's my offering."

Lewis echoes that desire.

"We were trying to make a universal piece so everyone could relate to it," he says. "Hopefully, it will inspire others to do murals and maybe promote some religious understanding."