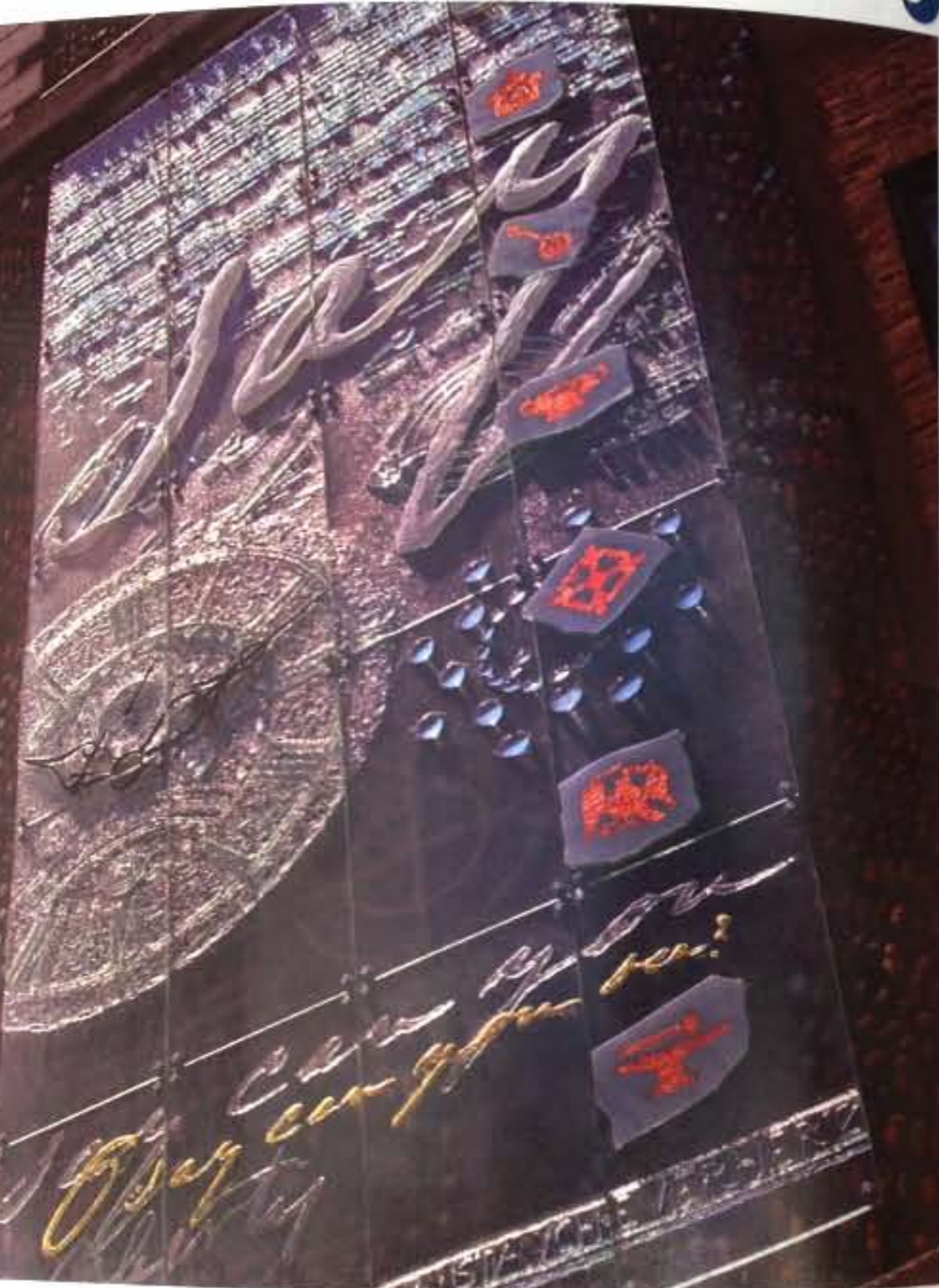


A Practicum in Public Artistry

William Cochran brings together a select group of artists to create extraordinary public mural projects



The Dreaming public art project is located in the heart of downtown Frederick, Md.

“Outward Bound for Artists.” That’s the phrase used by Nichole Blackburn and other students to describe a William Cochran Practicum. William calls it “an experiment.”

“What would happen,” William mused, “if you brought together a carefully selected, pre-trained group of faux finishers and introduced

them to public art by working on a public mural project? It’s advanced training, by invitation only. There are prerequisites, some pressure to perform, a lot of support and camaraderie.” That’s the Practicum.

William Cochran has been a public artist since 1988, creating quiet landmarks in American downtowns. While he works in several fine art

media, he is most associated with incredibly realistic trompe l’oeil painting, creating illusions with his paintbrush. Even his human figures are convincing enough that passersby sometimes try to talk to them.

A few years ago, William developed a series of classes called The Trompe L’oeil Mastery Program. Every artist begins with the Level 1

week-long workshop, where the focus is “learning to see” and accurately reproduce values and temperatures. This is the key to painting effective illusions and much harder than it sounds. Since William meets individual students “where they are” in their painting journey and each receives a generous amount of one-on-one instruction, students make a leap forward in their painting ability, whether novice or more advanced.

Level 2 increases the focus on value and temperature, but adds color theory. The students paint a colorful still life—metal, fabric, wood—using only the three primary colors plus white. Level 3 focuses on the most challenging subject: a portrait. To help answer questions about making murals portable, permanent and original, and to educate painters about all the options available to them with different materials, substrates, computer programs, cameras, lighting, etc., William developed The Technical Aspects of Mural Making, a three-day class that summarizes everything he has learned on these topics.

“Hands-down true enlightenment for the working professional muralist,” reads one evaluation form. Another reflects, “It is especially appreciated that you are thoughtful about what each individual student needs to do specifically to improve (his or her) work.” Words like “patient,” “kind,” “re-



Sky Dancing is a 40-square-foot trompe l’oeil mural for an arts-based early childhood school.

laxed” and “clear” are repeated over and over. Some students even talk about the classes as transformative, as getting “Williamized.”

“I really enjoy teaching,” William notes. “It’s rewarding to see the progress that painters make in such a short time.” His commissioned artwork schedule and design/planning work with cities limits the time he can devote to classes. But he says he will always try to make some time for teaching both because it is so satisfying and because “I learn as much by teaching as I do by painting.”

It became clear very early that some students were inspired by more than the painting techniques offered in the classes. Some were interested in practical aspects of creating outdoor murals and Cochran-style public artworks: large-scale, high-quality, meaningful, finely detailed. Others wanted opportunities to learn how to collaborate with communities, interact with business leaders and government agencies, and create large-scale work.

Public art is very different from faux finishing. “It’s a lot of extra work,” explains participant Jeanne Shemilt. The artist stands in the glare of the public spotlight, often controversially. It is often not as well compensated as private work. Your “client” can be like a Hydra—the mythological beast with many heads—with multiple committees of diverse stakeholders. An artist once said



Two painters from William's first class, Bonnie Wakeman and Paulette Piazza (shown at right), both from Colorado, came to help block in this mural. They stayed at the Lucy School farmhouse and painted each day at The Faux School in Frederick, Md., where Ron Layman generously donated space.



that to be a public artist you need "the eye of a journalist, the ear of a poet, the hide of an armadillo, the serenity of an airline pilot and the ability to swim." William wasn't expecting his "real job" to be compelling to professionals accustomed to running lucrative businesses. And yet to some, it was. So the Practicum began as a venture between a small group of interested and dedicated professionals and Studio William Cochran, each bringing something, each getting something.

To date, Studio William Cochran has run two Practicums, *Sky Dancing* and *The Dreaming*. For both, invitations were issued based on students' attitude, ability and desire for advanced training in this sort of practical atmosphere.

Sky Dancing: A Mural at Lucy School

Sky Dancing is a 40-square-foot ompe l'oeil mural for an arts-based early childhood school serving age 3 through grade 2. Lucy School is a national model for arts-based education located on a in the foothills of the Catoctin Mountains in north-central Maryland. The mural is the entrance feature for the preschool, housed in a renovated 19th-century German barn. Painted on stretched-canvas-covered-MDO panels with

Golden heavy body acrylic paints, the mural features a window of the same rough-hewn wood found throughout the barn, casements thrown open. Through them you see young children joyfully flying over the bucolic landscape, lifted free by their imaginations.

Two painters from William's first class, Bonnie Wakeman and Paulette Piazza, both from Colorado, came to help block in this mural. They stayed at the Lucy School farmhouse and painted each day at The Faux School in Frederick, Md., where Ron Layman generously donated space. They put to use their Level I training and also learned practical matters like stretching the canvas and transferring the im-

age in perspective so that the human figures would look correct when viewed from below. Finally, they worked on painting the window, wood graining and blocking in the smaller human figures. The project required long hours on scaffolding and lots of dedication from these excellent painters. They also opted to join in ongoing planning meetings about *The Dreaming*, also happening at that time.

After the Practicum, the mural was brought back to William's private studio, completed slowly over many months, in between other projects.

The Dreaming

The second Practicum was much larger and more extensive, an effort



The group that worked on *The Dreaming* public art project, from left: Jeanne Shemilt, Sheri Hoeger, Deanne Cunningham, Jolene Hemeon, Nichole Blackburn and Ryan Hoeger.



William works on the lift during installation of *The Dreaming*. The glass was fabricated at Derix Glasstudios in Germany. Photo by Teresa Cochran.



William works on the glass molds for *The Dreaming* at Derix Glasstudios in Germany.

to maximize benefits by having a larger group of painters with more interaction.

The *Dreaming* public art project in the heart of downtown Frederick, Md., (www.TheDreaming.info) includes mural painting, architectural art glass, carving, weaving, calligraphy, and public participation. The 500-square-foot mural layer creates the illusion of a three-story-tall fine art weaving based on a real weaving by Margaret Hluch about the size of a sheet of paper.

Half a dozen students gathered from around the country to participate, working for three to six weeks.

They included mother and son Sheri and Ryan Hoeger; Jolene Hemeon, the sophisticated mother of the flock; Nichole Blackburn, the L.A. twin; Deanne Cunningham, the newlywed high school art teacher; and Jeanne Shemilt, the Orlando nature lover.

The mural was painted on a heavy Eternit fiber-cement board using Keim Mineral Paints. The weaving acts as a background to set off the art glass and create a subtle metaphor for community and craftsmanship. Practicants learned how to work with the unfamiliar potassium-silicate based paint. They mixed colors, prepared the surface of the panels, transferred



Ryan Hoeger works on the weaving portion of *The Dreaming* mural project.

the design for this complex weaving over 20 three-by-10-foot and four-by-10-foot panels so that they would line up perfectly on the wall and appear correct in perspective. They then painted in teams on a series of cement boards that were temporarily installed at The Faux School in Frederick, Md., where Ron Layman donated space for this Practicum, too.

Fueled with healthy snacks and good coffee, regular instruction and inspiration, everyone worked very hard. Days were long and focused, but lightened by a lot of laughter. Some found time for canoeing, sketching hikes and visiting museums in D.C. and Baltimore. Several stayed at Lucy School, with the pond and forest nearby, and photographed incredible landscapes, sunsets, and flowers as proof of their adventure. Teresa Cochran, William's wife and business partner, gave tours of the downtown Frederick public art. Communal evening meals on the Cochran's deck were tremendously entertaining, with far-ranging