

## Lawndale Art Center mural gets a minimalist makeover

Molly Glentzer, January 5, 2018



Francesca Fuchs painted the latest mural for Lawndale Art Center's north wall, a project awarded annually to different artists.

The serene, minimalist mural that has materialized recently on the 3,200-square-foot north wall of Lawndale Art Center was created by a rather unlikely street artist: Francesca Fuchs, the head of painting at the Glassell School of Art.

Fuchs, who came to Houston as a fellow in the Glassell's Core Program 21 years ago, has built her reputation with smallish canvases in a subdued palette that can make a viewer feel as if she is peering at the images through a thin veil of gauze.

Fuchs thinks of her paintings as "quietly loud," she said.

She has wanted to give this wall a go for several years, ever since Lawndale began commissioning a new mural annually.

Louisiana-born, Los Angeles-based artist Russell Etchen created 2017's "About\_Rocks," a faux rock wall whose myriad gray pebbles each had cartoon eyes. Before that, Jonathan Leach painted the blue, orange, yellow, red and green "Ghost Grid" there, with thin lines that radiated from the building's three second-story windows to draw the eye toward the surrounding architecture and cityscape.

Each artist covers what has come before. Somewhere down in the layers of latex paint also lie Otabenga Jones & Associates' "The People's Plate," about the obesity epidemic, and a colorful collaboration between University of Houston professor Aaron Parazette and street artist Daniel Angiulu.

Fuchs noticed that her predecessors were using the wall essentially as a blank canvas. Originally trained as a sculptor, she wanted to integrate it instead, creating what would appear to be a huge installation and a "conversation" with the front of the building - especially its fluted, Art Deco front facade.

That's partly what inspired the illusion of six, perfectly spaced columns she has insinuated with long lines of soft gray and blue latex paints. Their open tops imply that maybe there is more to the columns that's invisible, as if they keep going somehow, into the heavens.

"It's a bizarre conversation, trompe l'oeil, but not obvious," she said. "So you wonder, 'What am I looking at? Am I in the realm of the building or the painting?'"

The mural looks black and white from a distance but contains at least seven or eight subtly varied colors that are slightly more distinct and punched-up than her small canvases.

"I hope it has the same shimmering quality, being present but also hovering a bit," she said.

The three windows posed a challenge: "Do you ignore them, reference them or 'disappear' them by integrating them?" she said.

She left them alone.

Fuchs does not expect everyone to see her other reference, but she borrowed the columns from the work of Pieter Jansz Saenredam, a 17th-century Dutch master known for his ghostly interiors of Gothic cathedrals, to suggest the role that art spaces play in contemporary society.

Fuchs has painted canvases as large as 10 by 12 feet in the past, and also painted interior walls as large as 13 by 16 feet. She is not afraid of heights, but she does get seasick, so painting from a cherry picker that swayed in the wind was not entirely pleasant.

"It's pretty daunting; 36 feet is pretty high up there," she said.