



BROWN AROUND TOWN

Remembering artist Greg Brown's playful murals and their lasting impact on the Palo Alto community

A surprise awaits passersby in downtown Palo Alto if they pay close enough attention. A UFO crashes into the bank. A pair of aliens sneakily climb a flight of cherry red stairs towards a doorway. These are just a few of the whimsical murals of artist Greg Brown that are incredibly treasured within the community.

Greg Brown, a 1969 Palo Alto High School graduate who died in 2014, is one of the most beloved artists in Palo Alto. Known for making viewers do a double-take, these pieces of art are scattered throughout the downtown area. Brown's artistic contributions to Palo Alto began when he was hired as the "Artist in Residence," a featured artist in one of the city's art centers, at age 24.

"He had an easel set up in one of the Palo Alto Art Center's studios," Greg Brown's wife, Julie Brown said. "People could watch him paint and comment or ask questions. This inspired him to take his paintings outside and put them on a wall."

Brown first gained approval from the city through a Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) grant, in

which they hired him as an official public artist. He then reached out to individual business owners for permission to paint murals on their buildings. Brown enjoyed incorporating the surroundings of his pieces into the paintings themselves. "Greg felt that his mural should fit in with its greater environment," Julie Brown said. "He wanted to surprise and delight the viewer."

Brown is known for using the trompe l'oeil — or "trick of the eye" style in his artwork. This type of painting creates the illusion for viewers that the art is an actual, three-dimensional object.

This technique is illustrated in his mural of a little boy fishing from a window, which imitates the actual window next to it on the building; his mural of a woman watering plants integrates a real bush into the piece. "[Brown's

murals are] a marvelous example of trompe-l'oeil and whimsy," Palo Alto public art director Elise DeMarzo said. "They [offer] people something unexpected and fun around the corner as they go about their daily lives."

Brown learned the trompe l'oeil technique as a teenager while working with

a mentor artist, Roberto Lupetti. "He washed brushes in exchange for lessons and observed this man's work closely," Julie Brown said. "Greg taught himself how to use an airbrush to get the subtle modeling he achieved with skin and fabric."

The mural of an alien in a UFO, which appears to be crashing into the side of the Comerica bank building on Lytton Avenue, is one of Brown's most admired trompe l'oeil pieces. "I like it because from far away, it almost has the illusion of it being real," junior Daniel Siegel said. "You have to look twice, especially if you haven't seen it before."

Brown based many of the characters in his murals on people in his own life and community, making them more personable. His "Pedestrian Murals," the collection of his initial nine paintings including the aliens and the boy fishing, featured several characters inspired by everyday people.

"His process for the Pedestrian Murals was fairly straightforward," Julie Brown said. "He'd get an idea, try a simple sketch and then find someone who fit his idea for the character. That person would be photographed in the position Greg needed, and then he was ready to begin."

In addition to harnessing inspiration from people in his life, Brown was also influenced by anything creative around him, like books, dreams or events he experienced. "He was always open to inspiration," Julie Brown said. "An example of a



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Julie Brown, Greg Brown's Wife



Brown, G. (1975). *Boy with Fishing Pole*

real event [that he took inspiration from] is the lady with a hose, where a bird sits. This really happened to his grandmother one day when she was out in her garden; she modeled her character in the mural. The people jumping off a building are known as ‘The Roofhoppers,’ [and were based on] a dream he’d had.”

Nearly every citizen of Palo Alto, no matter the generation, can recall catching a glimpse of one of Brown’s murals at some point in their lives. “They definitely add uniqueness to Palo Alto, and they make you stop and look,” senior Gianna

“His sense of humor is reflected in his artwork.”

Elise DeMarzo

Palo Alto Public Art Director

Brogley said. “It’s cool that the Palo Alto community is connected by the fact that everyone knows the murals, like you can say, ‘meet me by the mural with the guy pushing a [stroller] with his alien.’”

That’s what many people in Palo Alto cherish most about Brown’s work: the charming quirkiness. Walking down the street, one might be surprised to see an image of a man pushing an alien in a stroller, but that was Brown’s style, and it was representative of his personality.

“His sense of humor is very much re-

flected in his artwork,” DeMarzo said. “You couldn’t have just a basic conversation with him. He always liked a turn of phrase, and he [always brought] something with a big personality to that conversation.”

Brown was valued not just for his work but also for his welcoming personality.

Members of the community always felt included in his artwork, whether by simply witnessing him painting or striking up a lively conversation.

“In the time that he would work on-site, people would come up and talk to him,” DeMar-

zo said. “He never shied away from the public, so it doesn’t surprise me that in the course of creating [his murals], he also built in community outreach.”

His murals remain a significant element of Palo Alto today because of this community connection he built; each of his pieces has a story behind it or a memory someone can associate with it. “[One

time], I went by to check on him with [my daughters], and he gave them huge paintbrushes and had them paint in a little section with him,” DeMarzo said. “That was his personality; to engage people as they came by and make them feel like they were part of it. That moment really encapsulates my few encounters with Greg; he was tremendously warm, very funny and quick witted.”

Brown’s murals will forever be adored and honored within the community for bringing humor and joy to the streets of the city. He will always be remembered as a lively, outgoing presence that brought people into the process of his art. “His early Palo Alto murals connected with people on many levels,” Julie Brown said. “They showcase the nature of Palo Alto as I’ve always known it; at its best, it is innovative and diverse, [and] a place that values community and creativity.”

