

metroactive ARTS



Greg Ramar

LANDSCAPE Artist Lacey Bryant's massive new mural in North San Jose is one of the biggest in the city.

SEA SIDE

Giant new mural in north San Jose unveiled **BY ETHAN GREGORY DODGE**

WHILE WALKING north on 1st or 2nd Street from downtown San Jose, it's hard to miss the city's newest—and likely longest—street mural spanning the entire block on the exterior wall of the Ryland Mews apartment building.

The 9,450-square-foot mural by local artist Lacey Bryant depicts rolling hills of native California wildflowers. The vibrant art adds color to the otherwise brown segment of railroad tracks.

The hills become a green shoreline, with one final bluff jutting out into the ocean in the shape of a woman's

face. Her hair forms the treeline as she lies on her side across the horizon. Cradled in her arm is the face of man formed in the water's waves. As his body becomes one with the sea, a faint silhouette of a hand is the only other evidence of his existence. Pelicans fly into the vast, leading the eye to a lone, floating sea otter.

"That idea has been kicking around in my head for a pretty long time," says Bryant. It was inspired by a hill along 680 near the Vargas Road exit that Bryant finds to resemble a woman. "I knew [this mural] was going to be especially long, so I wanted to do reclining figures to make use of the space. The HOA wanted a nature look, so it was a perfect moment to bring those ideas together."

The mural was a project three years in the making, according to Paula Schnur, president of the Ryland Mews Home Owners Association. Schnur and the other residents wanted something special for their highly visible "huge canvas."

"We wanted to do something to make those railroad tracks in the neighborhood more beautiful," she says.

For Bryant, the choice of flowers was important.

"I wanted it to feel like a celebration of the area and depict the way the land looked before we developed [it]," she says. "There are a couple of flowers on there that have an edible corm, like a bulb, but smaller. Those used to be eaten by indigenous people."

With the help of local artists Marc Wallace and Stephen Longoria, the mural took two weeks to complete. From July 22 to August 5, 2022, the three worked on it for about 11 hours a day. During that time, dozens of people attracted by the change came to see the painting in action.

"It's amazing how it's brought the community together," Schnur says. "I've been out there watching and I've met more neighbors from outside Ryland Mews in the last two weeks than I have since I moved here in 1995."

The phenomenon complements another principle Bryant meant for the mural to symbolize.

"I wanted this piece to not only celebrate the natural beauty of the area, but also the people that make [it] up," she says. "To me, the mountain celebrates the people that come from here and the ocean represents the people that came from across the sea. They join together and make the Bay Area."

In Schnur's search for a muralist, she was eventually connected with Juan Carlos Araujo, co-owner and founder of Empire Seven Studios (an art studio which sits just a half-mile away from Ryland Mews) and current chair of the city's Arts Commission. In recent years, Empire Seven has been responsible for many of the murals around San Jose. A large number come from their annual San Jose Walls event each summer, which invites artists to paint several new murals over the course of a week.

Having seen her other works around San Jose—one on the side of the Recycle Bookstore on the Alameda and the other on Chase Bank on downtown Santa Clara Street—Schnur was already familiar with Bryant's art. When it came time to pick an artist, she knew she wanted Bryant. Araujo agreed.

"I had an artist in mind and he had an artist in mind," Schnur recalls. "And when we said the name, it was the same artist."

At the time, Bryant was booked solid for at least the next year. But Schnur felt she was worth the wait. Now that it's completed, Schnur feels right about the decision. Already, the work is listed as a tourist attraction on Google Maps.

"It's beyond my expectations," she says. "It's absolutely gorgeous. It's so vibrant and people are coming up and saying they love it." 

