The Chapel Hill News

Published: Dec 16, 2007 09:23 AM
Modified: Dec 09, 2007 08:15 AM

Save the murals: The parade, 1977

The Preservation Society of Chapel Hill is dedicated to saving the things that make Chapel Hill unique.

The society is asking community members to help preserve the downtown murals, many of which are fading, by e-mailing their thoughts about them to savethemurals@mail.com. If the society gets enough support it plans to create an "Adopt a Mural" program, allowing the public to save its favorite murals.

You can see the parade mural at night in staff writer Mark Schultz's video of Chapel Hill's community tree lighting at http://videos.newsobserver.com/?a=player&id=1579414.

Artist's statement by Michael Brown

The parade mural in Porthole Alley was painted in 1997. I was inspired by the wood carvings of a circus parade that used to be in a campus soda fountain called the Circus Room. It was near the old UNC baseball diamond (Davis Library now).

As a kid I used to walk on campus to get a cherry Coke at the fountain and watch baseball. I was very impressed by those fine carvings. I learned much later that the carver, Carl Boettcher, had derived his ideas from some William Mead Prince artwork. Prince had drawn a sort of Beat Dook parade to use in his book, "The Southern Part of Heaven," an idealized memoir of his boyhood in Chapel Hill.

I liked the idea of a parade mural since that alley had a constant parade of interesting characters going to and from campus. I also liked the idea of a parade because an alley gives mural viewers very little "viewing distance." By having a lot of detail (as in a parade) I could give the audience something to look at even if they could not see the whole picture at once. It was especially fun for me that the audience for the parade was actually moving while the parade was standing still.The effect of a parade passing by was still created.

Since the UNC carvings and a nationally prominent local artist inspired the mural, and since I myself had a Chapel Hill boyhood, the idea seemed to have a proper pedigree

Michael Brown's 'parade' mural in Porthole Alley.
Contributed photo

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and loads of source material. Since the mural was to be was so near the university I figured that couldn't hurt. That is also why I made it resemble a drawing, since the original "source material" was a drawing (also we didn't have enough money for color). All of the different objects and characters in the parade gave me a chance to use symbolism and tell a lot of visual inside jokes on both town and gown, draw caricatures of friends and include suggestions from passers by.

One day I would like to paint an audience for the parade on the opposite wall. Then the work would be complete

Local photographer Laura Shmania has created a photo gallery of Michael Brown's murals on her Web site at www.butterflites.smugmug.com.

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