

New downtown mural inspired by Charleston's history



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CHRIS DORST | Gazette-Mail photos

Artist Jesse Corlis works on his streetcar mural on a wall in the alley off Quarrier Street between Capitol and Hale streets. Corlis says the piece is a "kind of memory of what these bricks have seen," calling it romantic but slightly creepy.

The artist behind a new mural in downtown Charleston said the work reflects the history of the city.

Jesse Corlis is finishing a large mural of a streetcar stop in an alley off Quarrier Street, in between Capitol and Hale streets. He's spent more than 100 hours so far working on the mural, which is almost complete.

The new streetcar mural is inspired by old photos of downtown. Corlis said the mural isn't supposed to be of a specific image or people, but inspired by old memories.

He calls the image romantic, but slightly creepy. It's why the faces on the mural aren't clear, and the edges are hazy.

"It's kind of a memory of what these bricks have seen," Corlis said.

Painting on the old brick isn't simple. It's harder to paint fluid lines on the jagged edges of the bricks, and the imperfect surface is more difficult to work with. It's not as simple as painting lines on a white canvas, Corlis said. Because the surface has its own

horizontal and vertical lines, he has to adapt his work. Corlis has to constantly step back, examining the small details in the bricks.

“It slows things down quite a bit,” Corlis said.

People stop to see what he’s doing, sometimes staring silently while other times starting conversations. Corlis said sometimes it’s difficult to stay on task.

“The last thing I want to do is snub people,” Corlis said. “They say really nice things.”

He’s worked on several murals throughout the city, including multiple pieces inside Pies and Pints, a Mexican folk art-inspired mural on the side of Mi Cocina de Amor and a column of an octopus at Gallery 64.

As people talk, he continues to work, always paying close attention. Corlis said over the years it’s been easier to multitask while people compliment his work.

“It’s always tough to juggle that, but it’s also always rewarding,” Corlis said.

Corlis said he enjoyed art as a child. In between summers of art school, he’d paint homes, climbing up ladders similar to the ones he works on now. He said murals give him a chance to work with larger surfaces and have a different kind of creative freedom. He said many artists prefer to work alone, but he enjoys working in public.

“I’m not cooped up in a studio,” Corlis said. “I meet people a lot more doing this.”

He works on his days off from his job as a graphic designer. He’s traveled to other cities for Pies and Pints to create the White Elephant Saloon mural and other pieces for the restaurant. He works alone long hours in unfamiliar cities, painting when construction crews inside the restaurant head home for the night.

“It’s a very personal experience,” Corlis said.

Corlis said he hopes to finish the streetcar mural by the end of the week, depending on weather.

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