



Artist Profile & Overview of
Pediatric Mural Project for
NY Presbyterian Hospital.
Part 1 of a Series.

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WALLS THAT TALK

By GEORGETTE GOUVEIA

THE JOURNAL NEWS (Gannett / Westchester/Rockland, NY)
Original Publication: August 27, 2006

Like Alfred, Lord Tennyson's Ulysses, Sparkill painter James Kimak is a part of all that he has met. You could say that all of his professional experiences — serving as an illustrator on area newspapers, working as an inker at DC and Marvel comics, getting in on the ground floor of computer graphics at CBS and NBC — have led him to this moment: He has been commissioned by New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center in Manhattan to create a series of Big Apple-themed murals to grace its new Komansky Center for Children's Health.

For Kimak, the assignment has been the antidote to a career at a crossroads.

"To get this at a period in life when I was dissatisfied with work, it's been sweet," says the 52-year-old artist, who has his own graphics business (kimakdesign.com). "I still pinch myself. It's an ongoing dream."

It's one of those summer days in the city when the heat index has reached a gazillion degrees. Yet Kimak is totally jazzed: Workers for Applied Image Inc., the Farmingdale, N.J., company that is reproducing and installing his designs, have arrived to hang the Central Park murals in the Komansky Center's Family Lounge.

The process is similar to hanging wallpaper. "Except I won't put up wallpaper," cracks Gregg Johannessen, one of the subcontractors on the project. As he talks, he continues to smooth down a panel and cut around sconces with a fluidity that underscores the lounge's curving blond walls and soothing fish tank. "It adds a nice touch," he says of Kimak's handicraft. For the lounge, Kimak has created a Postimpressionist vision of the park, with vibrant splashes of color serving as a backdrop for bikers and benches, skateboarders and streetlamps. The



(Inside page)

beauty of these murals is that their painterly quality hides a mixed-media approach. Kimak uses a combination of photography, painting, computer graphics and cutouts for a collage-like effect.

In this, the great collagist Robert Rauschenberg has been a major influence, he says. But since the Komansky Center is a pediatric hospital within a hospital, the tone is gentler than in Rauschenberg's work, with an emphasis on enchantment and whimsy. A cartoon-like blue caterpillar, a motif in the murals, perches on one of the Central Park benches. Through the fish tank, visitors can spy the blue whale that is one of the signatures of the American Museum of Natural History, which sits magisterially off the park.

"The general idea of the murals is to entrance everyone," Kimak said in an earlier interview. "I almost think of it like a large children's book."

Reflecting on those words now, he adds, "I think of that more and more. Each wall is like a page. If the funds are there, there's talk of turning the murals into a children's book."

Walk through the center's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, and you feel as if you're turning the pages of a book on some of the city's greatest cultural institutions, on the stretch of Fifth Avenue known as Museum Mile. The murals in the unit's corridors - which transport you from the Metropolitan Museum of Art at 82nd Street to El Museo del Barrio at 104th - teem with images and Gauguin-like color, as if to cheer the tiny patients hooked up to monitors and tubes in rooms off the halls. But there's an entirely different vibe here from the Family Lounge's Sunday in the park. The NICU, as it's called, is truly the children's hour, thanks to artwork Kimak has culled from New York City and Rockland, Westchester and Bergen county schoolchildren, with an assist from his wife, Angela Langston, an art teacher at Sleepy Hollow High School. (The mural project is something of a family affair. That's 10-year-old son Sam riding his bike in a Central Park scene, while 16-year-old daughter Jamie's hand turns up in one of the Museum Mile panels.)

Among the student artworks is a misty pastel-colored landscape and a close-up of sunflowers, a la Van Gogh, provided by children at the Green Meadow Waldorf School in Chestnut Ridge. Snapshots of Komansky Center graduates are joined by four empty spaces that will be filled with photos of current patients.

The trademark Kimak playfulness is still in evidence: There are quotes from such disparate philosophical artistes as Picasso and Kermit the Frog, who offers this nugget: "I feel strongly that the



Central Park Theme: Rotunda
leading to the PICU

visual arts are of vast ... importance. Of course, I could be prejudiced. I am a visual art." A fire extinguisher, mounted on a wall, seems to meld into an image of a fire engine at a red light on Fifth — a kind of reverse trompe l'oeil.

Actual trompe l'oeil can be found upstairs in the Pediatrics Procedures Suite, where some thoughtless worker appears to have left a piece of masking tape on Kimak's skyline panorama. But no, it's an image of masking tape, to give the work a perfectly imperfect feel. No doubt there will be more visual jokes in the East River Passageways theme he's developing for the Pediatrics Intensive Care Unit. The remaining two sections will explore midtown destinations and Coney Island, with the entire project expected to be completed next spring.

The breezy style was only part of what earned Kimak the hospital gig.

"We had another artist working on the murals, and this person failed miserably," says Jennifer Eno, the hospital's senior project leader for interiors.

Eno, who lives in Nyack, knew Kimak, a painter on the original project, and with time running short, approached him about taking over. She has not been disappointed.

"Jim works exceedingly well with the doctors and listens well," she says. "He's been able to take their vision and produce it."

Tim MacCutcheon — a sales associate with Applied Image who's on hand to oversee the murals' installation — is also impressed with Kimak's feel for large-format graphics

"This is his first stab at this, and it's been great giving him an education."

For his part, Kimak, a latter-day Ulysses, says the education has been as much a geographical and psychological odyssey as a professional one.

"I wanted to lead viewers on a journey," he says, relaxing in the plant- and photograph-filled office of pediatrician-in-chief Dr. Gerald M. Loughlin. "With the pictures of Museum Mile, for instance, you walk up Fifth Avenue. But I'm also going on the journey and discovering things about New York I never knew." Like the vast array of small craft on the East River.

"If I hadn't had the assignment to walk up the East River — well, I've never walked up the East River — I wouldn't have discovered that there were so many different types of boats. For kids, I have to think, What do I want to tell them?"

He says the previous artist on the project failed because he didn't recognize the potential for narrative in the murals.

Kimak's story is that of a boy who grew up in Clifton, N.J., the only son of Theodore Kimak, a chemist "who was a pretty good artist and photographer." Young Jim learned to draw from his



Skyline: Translucent Window
Design for Day Procedure area
9th Floor.

father's figure studies.

Kimak was living in a beach house in Milford, Conn., at loose ends after graduating from the University of Bridgeport with a degree in fine arts, when he "just lucked out" and landed a job as an artist on the New Haven Register. That was the beginning of a voyage through the newspaper, network and dot-com worlds that saw him ink the backgrounds of some of the most famous comic-book heroes — including The Flash, The Justice League, The Hulk and The Fantastic Four — and serve as art director at NBC.com and creative director at CNBC.com.

It was in the late 1980s that he started painting, ultimately becoming one of the founding members of the Piermont Flywheel Gallery. In 1992, he had his first one-man show, at the Edward Hopper House Art Center in Nyack — a fitting place, since the geometric poetry of his light-sliced buildings is very Hopperesque.

His work took on a nocturnal moodiness all its own in the mid-'90s, as Kimak's mother, Helen, fought a losing three-year battle with cancer.

"I had a bit of anger at what she was suffering and was attracted to night at that time," he says of canvases that set Rockland against the inky, twinkling backdrop of the Hudson River.

Kimak calls the exhibit of work that came out of that period, presented at the Allen Sheppard Gallery in Chelsea, the strongest of his career, because it came from the heart.

There's no doubt, though, where his professional heart lies now. Kimak knows what it's like to spend time in a hospital and find blank walls staring back at your sorrow. No longer.

"This is the most satisfying work I've ever had as a professional," he says of the mural project. "There's creative satisfaction. But there's also emotional satisfaction in knowing that the reason this is happening is for children who are sick."

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A worker puts the finishing touches on James Kimak's Central Park murals at the Komansky Center for Children's Health at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center. Elizabeth Thomson/The Journal News

WALLS THAT TALK

SPARKILL ARTIST JAMES KIMAK CREATES MURALS FOR A HOSPITAL

Georgette Gouveia
The Journal News

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This is the first in an occasional series following Sparkill artist James Kimak as he creates a set of murals for the new Komansky Center for Children's Health at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center in Manhattan.

Walk through the center's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, and you feel as if you're turning the pages of a book on some of the city's greatest cultural institutions, on the stretch of Fifth Avenue known as Museum Mile. The murals in the unit's corridors — which transport you from the Metropolitan Museum of

Please see MURAL, 2E



Above: Central Park Theme by Family Lounge

Below: Museum Mile Theme in the NICU

