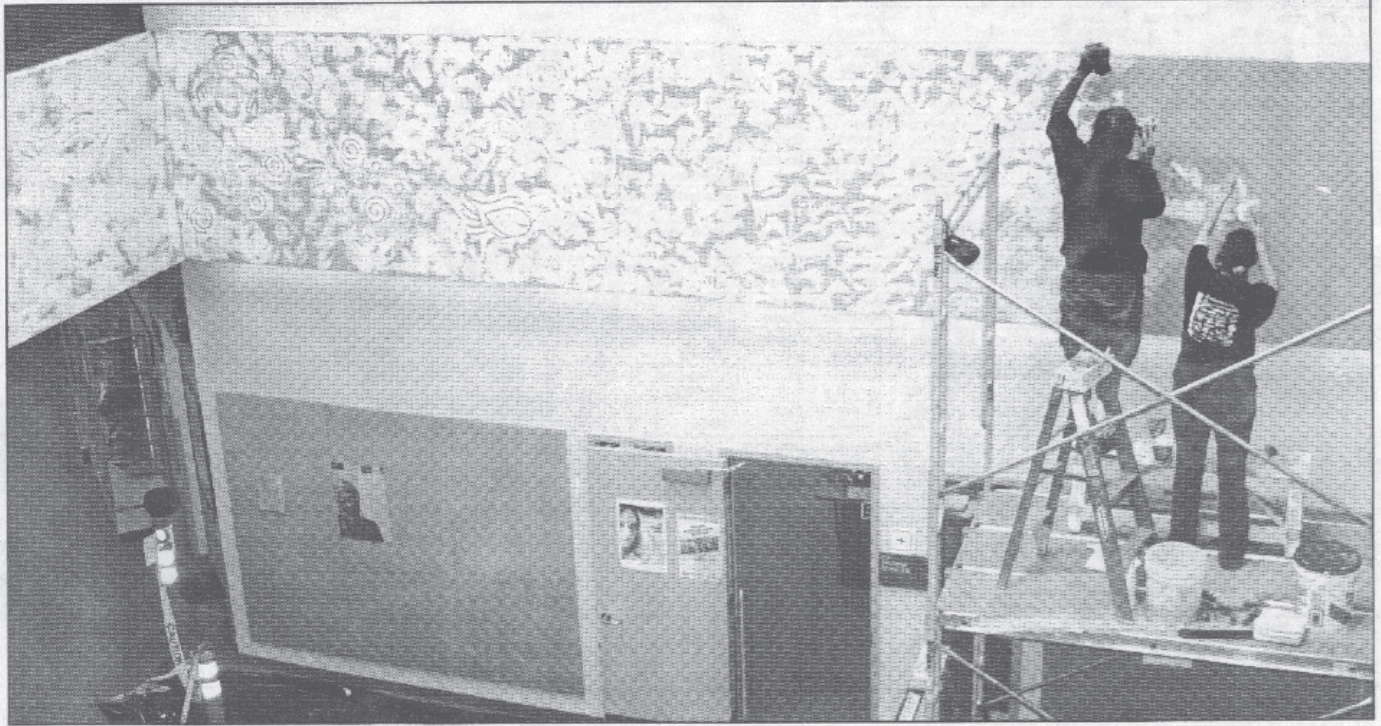


Sitka Weekend

Entertainment • TV Schedules • The Arts Friday, August 3, 2007



Artist Roberto Salas and student Peggy Reeve continue work on the UAS mural project Thursday. (Sentinel Photo by Kerry Stromme)

Sitka Artists Part of the Big Picture

By SHANNON HAUGLAND
Sentinel Staff Writer

Last year, San Diego muralist Roberto Salas left his mark on Sitka through his work with other artists on the giant Wild Fish mural on the side of the Marine Services Center.

This summer he's leaving another mark -- this time, with drywall mud.

Salas is working with the University of Alaska Southeast Sitka art department director Jamie Autrey, and UAS art students, on a mural of prehistoric Southeast petroglyphs circling the atrium of the Sitka campus building.

"Last year, Jamie and I started talking about doing one of the hallways here," Salas said. But after talking about it a little, and looking at areas that could be enhanced in the building, their eyes led them upward to a five-foot-wide blank frieze around the open atrium next to the front desk. That became the new canvas for the project.

For the project, Autrey collected various images of Southeast petroglyphs available from books and the Internet. Since UAS has a large ceramics program, and Autrey is a ceramics instructor, the two also talked about incorporating some ceramics themes into the project.

"How could I do that if we're just doing it with paint?" Salas said.

The solution became drywall mud, pasted over stencils of actual petroglyph designs to create the images around the atrium. Students this week were at work, hands deep in drywall mud, 10

feet off the ground on scaffolding.

After the mud is applied with a drywall knife, the positive or negative image is removed, and the image is translated onto the wall.

Peggy Reeve, one of the students, was covering an image of a deer in mud in one high section of the mural on Wednesday.

The technique "creates beautiful relief," Salas said.

The piece uses the various petroglyph images to build on an evolution theme around the atrium, starting with concentric circles, followed by fish and fish themes, land animals, myths built on animal themes, and back to the concentric circles.

"It has a nice movement and story," Salas said.

Building on the ceramics theme, the artists next will incorporate earth-tone acrylic washes on top of the mud relief images, applied with sponges.

"They'll layer things over and over until you get an effect that's really beautiful," Salas said. "It's a very nice technique that lends itself to any type of theme."

Autrey this week was working on how to incorporate ceramic details above the frieze. And he said he would also like to put together a brochure that tells visitors the details of where each of the images was found.

Salas is one of four visiting artists offering classes this summer through UAS. Others were Andreas Goff, who taught a class in clay sculpture, followed by Tony Bridge in digital photography. After Salas leaves, Steven Hill will teach a course in

pottery.

Salas said the UAS mural is one of three or four public art projects Salas will work on this year. He said he was eager to come back to Sitka after falling in love with the community, and seeing the enthusiasm for public art as well.

"One of the things I'm seeing here, is a real thrust in trying to create a little more visual art in the city," Salas said. "Pretty soon, you're going to have a great collection."

He noted the recent addition of totem poles and the Wild Fish mural as evidence of growing community support for public art.

"The city is going into a nice movement with enhancing the city with more art," he said. "Art serves the community and it serves all purposes -- improving the quality of life for residents; and serving the tourist industry. All these things are important."

One of the challenges and joys of public art, Salas said, is working with community members on projects. As on the Wild Fish project, Salas has taken on local assistants who have demonstrated an aptitude and interest in the work.

Lisa Teas, who graduated from Mt. Edgecumbe High School this year, caught the attention of Salas when she helped with the Wild Fish project. She was hired this year to help with another project in Ketchikan with other artists, and this fall will travel to San Diego and south of Monterey Bay for another multi-artist project that includes Ketchikan designer Ray Troll.

"It's really exciting," said Teas, 18. "It's an awesome opportunity to be able to say I've already participated on three different murals, and that I was paid on all three."

Teas said she hopes to start college this spring, and has been encouraged by Salas to do so. But she feels she is gaining irreplaceable experience and art lessons through her work on the projects.

"This is an education in itself," Salas agreed. "You can't replace it."

With the mural only days from completion, UAS-Sitka Director Jeff Johnston said he is pleased with the results.

"It's looking really nice. I'm really pleased by the efforts," he said. "It will really be a centerpiece for the atrium."

Johnston said the piece also fits in well with one of UAS' "core values" to serve as a "center for culture and the arts, with a focus on Alaska Native traditions."

Salas, 51, was born in El Paso, Texas, received his bachelor's degree from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, and his master's degree from University of California at San Diego. He also owns an art gallery specializing in Southwest design art, and gives presentations and workshops on method and techniques.

Will he be returning to look for yet another project in Sitka?

"Absolutely. I'm looking to come back, create another project and enhance Sitka," he said.