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Human labor

Artist Ethan Murrow draws public into Manchester history with Sharpie installation

BY JULIA ANN WEEKES
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Jamal Thorne helps artist Ethan Murrow on his immersive drawing installation at the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester. The installation is inspired by the history and innovation in Manchester. (DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER)



Vermont artist Ethan Murrow and his team of artist assistants have quite literally been drawing the public into an installation of Queen City history at the Currier Museum of Art.

“Hauling” gets its official unveiling Saturday, Sept. 15, but visitors to the Manchester museum have been watching the action unfold over the past three weeks.

Murrow and six area artists have been transforming more than 100 feet of gallery wall space into panoramic images with fine-tipped Sharpie pens — about 900 of them, Murrow recently told a crowd assembled for a special after-hours reception at the Ash Street museum.

The project, two years in the making, was inspired by Manchester’s own history of toil, something that both propelled industry advances

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and came at the expense of its workers, including scores of women and children in the mills.

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“That historical weight,” as Murrow called it, can be seen in the faces and taut body language of the figures that pull, yank, strain and brace themselves to hold up the detritus of centuries of human labor — everything from fishing nets to manufacturing tools. It’s mean to span Manchester’s history from Native American life to today’s high-tech world.

To tell that story, Murrow worked with a host of collaborators to put a human face to the project. In fact, all of the people represented in the large, detailed drawings are amateur actors who took part in a photo shoot earlier this year.

“I asked each of the actors to hold things ... imagining that they’re hoisting these massive tools and objects. And they thought I was crazy because they were actually just holding a yoga mat,” Murrow said, joking about how the actors had no idea what the finished product would look like. “It was a testament to them (being able) to get into character and embrace the absurdity of the project.”

He’s talking about the herculean aspect of work that’s not only exhausting and self-defeating at times but just plain futile at others — like the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who was tasked with forever rolling a huge rock up a hill only to see it fall back down the hill again and again.

The mounds of objects and tools, as well as the figures, are caught in endless loops that connect the past with the present, and Murrow has inserted his own trade into this roomful of action.





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“‘Hauling’ glorifies drawing as manual labor, cleverly categorizing the artist as an itinerant worker who progresses on the merit of his skills,” according to an exhibit placard.

And it took a lot of work by six artist assistants to bring Murrow’s vision to life on the walls of the gallery over the course of several weeks. They included Ariana Lee, Cody Mack, Shailinn Messer, Nicolas Papa, Natalia Slattery and Jamal Thorne.

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Rope is a central theme in the drawings, winding through winches and pulleys and stretching from task to task from one wall to the next. It’s a purposeful repetition that references the history of Manchester, from “the use of the river as a native fishing site to Colonial times and the Industrial Revolution and on to contemporary” times, Murrow said.

A striking 52-foot scroll continuously turning on a mechanic sculpture at the center of the room is meant to be a kind of clock, and it seems to hint at how time can be both logged and lost, remembered and forgotten as generations come and go. The scroll depicts twining strands of thick rope, with words that frame human labor as something that has both strengthened and worn the threads of the community —


from “pressing,” “mending,” “scrubbing” and “polishing” to “struggling,” “plundering,” “targeting” and “segregating.”

The scroll stretches and winds on a sculpture created by Mic Billingsly, and calls to mind the pivotal looms, newspaper printing presses and machinery that churned the Merrimack River for mill power, said Samantha Cataldo, the Currier’s assistant curator.

Admission is \$15; \$13 for ages 65 and older, \$10 for students and \$5 for ages 13 to 17. The exhibit will close in May 2019.

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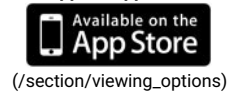


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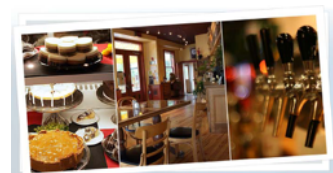
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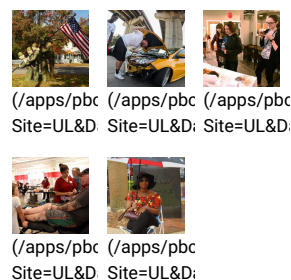


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