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JACKSON COUNTY COURTHOUSE
/ Look up

'Fresco' celebrates everyday people

N.Y. artist Chris Doyle turns Jackson County employees' photos into a huge image for the ceiling.

By ALICE THORSON
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Digital fresco.

Oh, brave new world.

For centuries, making a fresco meant painting on wet plaster.

In his new "digital fresco" for the ceiling of the Jackson County Courthouse, New York artist Chris Doyle brings the computer into the process and comes up with a piece that both realism buffs and Edgeville-types should be able to agree on.

The artwork, which will fill the long, vaulted ceiling of the building's central second-floor corridor, features digitized versions of Doyle's life-sized watercolors of county employees.

The portraits are printed on a huge expanse of matte vinyl — about 146 feet long and 14 feet wide — to be affixed to the ceiling.

"There's almost no art hanging in the building," Doyle said in a recent interview, "but there are paintings of the retired judges in their courtrooms."

"What happens when the maintenance guy retires?" he asked. "Everybody should have a chance to have their image remain."

For his artwork, a \$100,000 commission under Jackson County's public art program, Doyle decided to celebrate the maintenance guy and others.

"I went down and photographed about 85 to 90 people who work in the building in various positions and came back and reconfigured them into this ceiling painting," he said.



The finished mural, scheduled to be installed next week and ready for public viewing the following week, is a composite of 37 portraits. They are striking, and in a dynamic yet dignified way, these everyday people represent the perfect high art rejoinder to the vulgarities of reality TV. The mural will be visible during regular courthouse hours, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

The subjects appear larger than life and dramatically foreshortened.

"You're really looking up at them," Doyle said. "Some people are reaching down, and their hands are huge."

"They remind me of baroque and rococo illusionist ceilings in the 17th and 18th centuries," said Ian Kennedy, curator of European art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. "They seem very lively and upbeat."

Doyle took inspiration from Italian Renaissance frescoes and the wall paintings of Thomas Hart Benton, but his decision to present the figures against a stark white background gives them a fresh, contemporary feel.

"While most murals typically illustrate myth, or in the case of Benton, show the worker in the context of performing a task, I chose to isolate the figures, taking away the 'story,'" he explained.

"Chris is playing off that history, but doing it in a more postmodern fashion," said Porter Arneill, Kansas City's public art administrator. "The greater intrigue is that this mural is inside a 1930s art deco building."

In an illustrated brochure he compiled to accompany the fresco, Arneill aligns Doyle's focus on the common man with

Benton's depictions of ordinary Missourians in his murals for the State Capitol in Jefferson City and the Truman Library in Independence.

Truman, a former Jackson County executive, makes "a guest appearance" in Doyle's mural, appearing in a photograph held by one of the county workers. Viewers also may recognize the figure of current County Executive Katheryn Shields.

Renaissance murals often incorporated portraits of the patrons who commissioned them, Doyle noted. He put Shields in his fresco, he said, to recognize her role in founding the Jackson County Public Arts and Preservation Program.

Created by executive order in February 1996, the program is modeled after Kansas City's 1 percent for art program, which sets aside for art 1 percent of the public funds used for the construction of civic buildings.

The finished mural won't be the end of Doyle's portrayal of Kansas Citizens.

In late September he will begin shooting video of local residents flying (off unseen trampolines) for his next big project — a \$1.3 million commission under Kansas City's 1 percent for art program — for the new Sprint Center. The flying footage will appear on three 10-foot oval video screens set amid special plantings and water elements outside the arena.

