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Diversity on display: UNR adds two new murals to campus (photos)

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Image: Isaac Hoops

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By Kristen Hackbarth and Isaac Hoops

When students and faculty return to the University of Nevada, Reno, campus in the coming weeks, they'll be met with two new murals highlighting diversity, inclusion and equity.

The mural project, which was completed in July, is the culmination of two years of discussion and planning from two separate groups of students.

According to a statement from UNR, "Two groups of students were simultaneously but independently vocalizing their desire to have an art mural on campus that would be designed and created around the themes of diversity, equity and inclusion...[They] expressed ongoing concern about a lack of representation of diversity and people of color on campus and were seeking a proactive and positive solution."



The proposals made their way to Vivian Zavataro, director of The Lilley Museum of Art, and Tamara Scronce, director of the School of the Arts. Together, the pair saw an opportunity to unite the two projects and bring in an accomplished artist to create the murals.

"We are grateful for the students who stepped up and lobbied for this message; they are the reason these murals are happening," Scronce said. "We are genuinely excited this project came about through student initiatives and is fully funded by student programming funds and School of the Arts student art fees."

The murals were originally planned for the east-facing façade of Sierra Hall on Virginia Street at 10th Street, and on the west-facing wall of the Ansari Business Building auditorium, between Ansari and the Pennington Student Achievement Center. However, once the murals were designed the Ansari location was scrapped and the mural site was moved to an interior wall of the Church Fine Arts building.

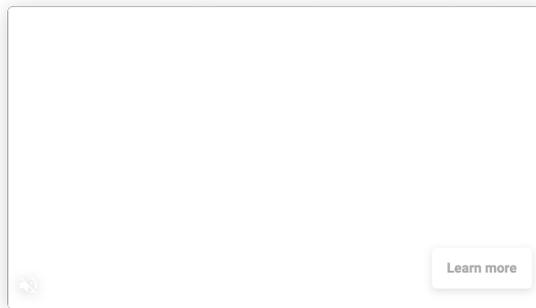
UNR Master of Fine Arts graduate Rafael Blanco was commissioned to paint the murals. Blanco, who is originally from Spain, currently lives outside of Chicago and works as an art professor and working artist, exhibiting work in museums and galleries and completing a growing number of public art murals.

Blanco said he was excited to be a part of something that was so important to the campus and the community—and of such scale.

"So, this may be the largest. Sure. Definitely is the tallest," he said, referencing the Sierra Hall mural. "And [while] I'm super excited about, obviously, the scale, I think the bigger, the better to make a point that you cannot miss it. But also, I'm super excited to be part of something so important. Absolutely."



Artist Rafael Blanco in late June, when he was part way through painting the mural on Sierra Hall. Image: Isaac Hoops



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The message of the murals resonated with him as well. “To me, it’s about the human race. It’s about humanity,” he said. “Obviously, it’s going to be about diversity, but we want to express and celebrate our differences, but also our commonalities. I love how similar we are, even though we may be from different cultures, with different color, with different values, with different customs, we’re all human. I know it sounds very ideal, but I believe in [it] a hundred percent. I think now is the time to ask those questions, to talk about it more than ever.”

Blanco said that buildings are often visually boring but the nature of this project allows for him to use bold colors that he said people are usually very scared of. “It’s going to be really loud,” he said.

The mural designs were created specifically for each site after Blanco was provided with images of the walls. He said that each mural must be designed this way because each wall, and the way that the wall is seen by people, is different. He also said that environmental concerns impact not just the design, but his ability to work. He painted every day from sunrise to sundown, dealing with wind, rain and painting within the confines of his reach via a boom lift.

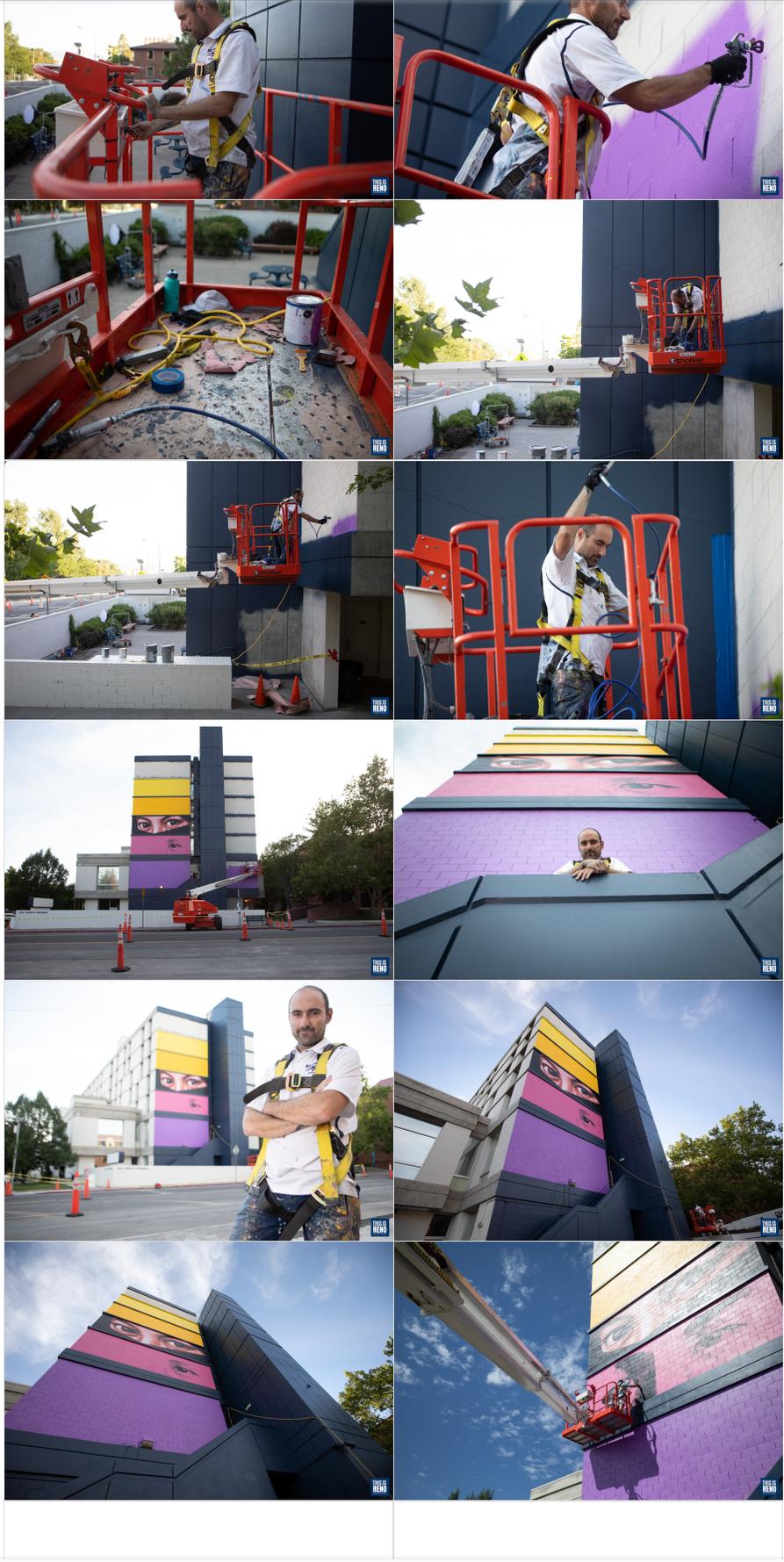
But despite those challenges, he said the timing for this project, amidst the pandemic, was perfect.

“I love to adjust, and I love to talk to people. I mean, I only feel like I don’t live in a window anymore,” Blanco said of working outside and chatting with passersby that were observing his work.

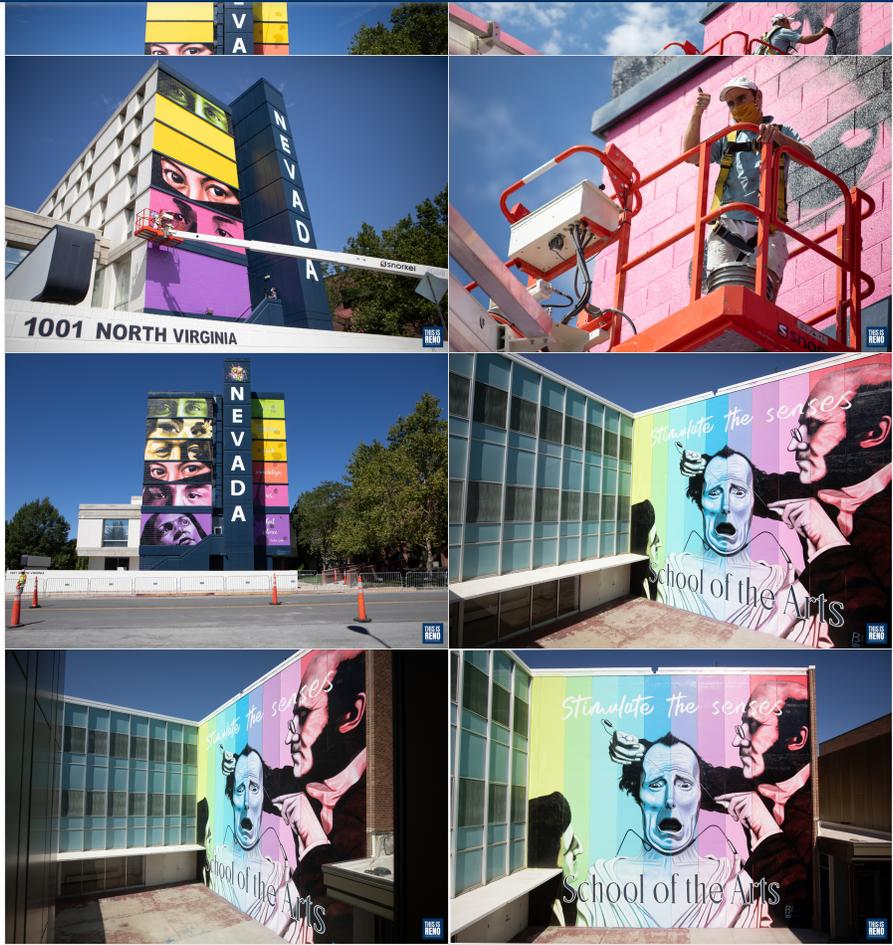
“Getting to know the people that are going to live with them, you know, they’re going to see this mural every single day. Every time that they are going to see the mural, they are going to think of our interactions. And then they are seeing it as [it’s] been made. So, they will always remember that... They’re going to have a personal connection.”

Some students are already invested in the murals. Kiara Steinhorst, a student staff member for Residential Life, said, “I personally am very excited to see [the murals] and know they will effect change on campus.” However, she also cautioned it is important that these murals cannot be expected to be a Band-Aid for issues on campus regarding diversity. She believes ongoing action is necessary and





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