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New mural on B Street portrays justice, cultural unity

Rafael Blanco leads the creation of a new downtown San Mateo ground art

By Alyse DiNapoli, Daily Journal staff
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Diversity has been a common thread throughout Rafael Blanco’s entire artistic career, no matter the medium. But for his latest project, the 42-year old artist has taken to the streets of San Mateo to create a mural specific to racial justice.

“The whole point for me is to celebrate our differences so that we can understand each other better. It’s a way of unifying us and realizing how different we are and at the same time, how similar we are,” said Blanco.

The initiative — which comprises two 240-long sections in the center of B Street in downtown San Mateo — first came about in 2020 as a result of the city’s Racial Equity Project, which allocated \$200,000 to create an art project that promotes San Mateo’s cultural and racial diversity.

Blanco has created murals for the past nine years, but this is his first time creating one on the ground, requiring different painting materials due an asphalt backdrop, as well as physical adjustments from kneeling for long hours.



Ana Lopez de San Roman Blanco, left, and Faustino Romero, assist in the creation of the new ground mural.

Alyse DiNapoli/Daily Journal

Each section of the mural is meant to represent a different culture, and while certain parts may seem obvious to some, others are left intentionally ambiguous. Even though Blanco's work usually depicts more realistic visuals, he also wanted to ensure this piece was more abstract.

"We did that on purpose, so that way we are not naming the culture. We wanted to keep it that way so anyone can feel represented if they like that pattern. So it's very open to interpretation, even though patterns may be very clear to some people if they come from that background," he said.

While the artist, originally from Spain, is now based in Chicago, he lived in Oakland for about six years and still feels a connection to the Bay Area. He first visited the United States when he was 19 and was struck by how different it was from his native country.

"I was so confused and fascinated with all of the diversity. I come from a country where we are all the same. Finding two people who didn't have the same background was fascinating to me. Everyone had a different religion, different way of thinking, different clothing, different food," he said. "Diversity has been a repetitive concept throughout my work."

Blanco previously taught art in several universities, but with an increased focus on public art funding nationwide, he started to create murals full time. Compared to his previous studio work, he said he prefers the communal experience and public participation that murals provide.

Several of his own family members and friends have also traveled to the Bay Area to assist on the project, which began last week and is estimated to be completed by Oct. 28.

You can find Rafael Blanco's artwork work at rafael-blanco.com.

alyse@smdailyjournal.com

(650) 344-5200 ext. 102

alyse@smdailyjournal.com

(650) 344-5200 ext. 102



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