

The Washington Post

NEWS | POLITICS | OPINIONS | BUSINESS | LOCAL | SPORTS | ARTS & LIVING | GOING OUT GUIDE | JOBS | CARS | REAL ESTATE | SHOPPING

'Colin Powell' Art Reaches For the Sky

N.Y. Artist's Mural Will Grace Jamaica Embassy

By Robin Shulman
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, June 10, 2009

NEW YORK -- Walk into Dorothea Rockburne's studio on Grand Street in the SoHo section of Manhattan and enter her laboratory for visual exploration of the sky.

Brilliant cerulean and midnight-blue paint covers sheets of paper pinned to an easel. Printouts of constellations are scattered across a worktable. The Web browser shows a NASA page with astronomy photographs. Back issues of Astronomy Magazine sit near a video series about the universe. And Rockburne's paintings of the hot and cool colors of space, and the circling paths of motion in the universe, hang on the walls and pile on the desks.

Rockburne is preparing a 41-foot-tall mural of the night sky -- as it looked at the time of Colin Powell's birth -- to be mounted at the U.S. Embassy in Jamaica, where Powell's family is from. Her "Homage to Colin Powell" was commissioned by the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies, a nonprofit organization dedicated to installing works by American artists in U.S. embassies around the world. Work on the mural started Tuesday at the Queens Museum of Art. After a complicated process of construction in New York, the piece is scheduled to be flown to Kingston in the fall, where it will stretch the length of an atrium wall in the recently built embassy.

Powell was born in Harlem, so this night sky is not the one his parents would have seen, but the one his grandparents back in Jamaica might have looked up to. Powell himself said he doesn't know the precise time of his birth on April 5, 1937, which also affects the positions of the stars, so Rockburne picked an arbitrary time that night.

She used a simple software program to generate diagrams of the constellations, which she then translated into her own visual language. Her painting shows a blue and black and white sky crisscrossed with the lines connecting the stars. She also included a ram's head, which is a symbol of Aries, Powell's astrological sign -- and also an ancient Egyptian motif, suggesting both his ancestral roots in Africa and Egyptian knowledge of astronomy, Rockburne said. Her maquette is to be enlarged onto the mural, with a scale of 1 inch to 1 foot.

"This taps the art history of the painting of skies to illustrate the connectedness of humanity," said Rockburne, who -- like all of the foundation's artists with the embassy projects -- volunteered her time. "I love the scale of it."



The Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies, formed in 1986, has since raised \$42 million in donations and has installed works by 145 American artists in 70 embassies. A Sol LeWitt mural of a red spiral on a blue background is being reproduced for the U.S. Mission to the United Nations. Ellsworth Kelly designed a totem sculpture for the U.S. Embassy in Berlin. Louise Bourgeois donated bronze figures for the embassy in Beijing.

A few years ago, the group approached Rockburne, whose works are part of collections at the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and asked her to create a tribute to Powell. Long engaged with astronomy, she came to the idea of the night sky of his birthday.

Rockburne attended the influential but short-lived Black Mountain College in the 1950s and studied under Max Dehn, a mathematician close to Albert Einstein. In the 1960s, she began to incorporate aspects of topology and set theory into her work. In the 1970s, she became known in the art world for her purely abstract, geometric compositions of cut and folded paper.



In 1991, traveling in Italy, she happened upon an 18th-century villa with an astronomy room. A ceiling fresco charted the supposed elliptical orbits of planets around the sun, with a hole where a telescope could gaze into the open sky.

She was fascinated. She got permission to go to the Vatican Library and look at Galileo's notebooks. She said she began to understand the true meaning of the Renaissance -- not "just a flare in art," but a body of knowledge of mathematics, philosophy and astronomy the Greeks got from Egypt, digested and delivered to Europe. Since then she has been painting the sky.

To some, Rockburne, 76, who grew up in Montreal, is an unusual choice for the job of a tribute to Powell. For one, she's a Democrat.

"My liberal friends said, 'I beg your pardon?'" Rockburne said. "I said, 'Yes, actually I'm a fan of his.'"

Rockburne, who is slight and graceful with pale blue eyes, said she is not a political person. She met Powell and his family several times years ago, though, and developed a personal respect for the man. "He's a class act."

Producing a work this large has been challenging.

EverGreene Architectural Arts, a New York-based decorative arts studio, was contracted to execute Rockburne's design on the full-size canvas. The group searched for more than a year for a wall large enough to accommodate a 41-foot painting -- looking at Broadway theaters, armories, scenic shops and soundstages, said Bill Mensching, director of EverGreene's mural studio. Then the Queens Museum of Art agreed for the mural to be produced in its soaring gallery, which was originally built to house the New York City Pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair, and is adjacent to a defunct ice rink.



An enormous scissor lift was needed to function as a traveling platform for artists to work on the mural. When the lift would not fit through any door, the team ended up

taking it into the ice rink, driving it down the Zamboni ramp, jackhammering a hole in a cinder-block wall and delivering the lift to the gallery.

To enlarge Rockburne's image and transfer it to the wall, the artists used a pouncing technique that goes back to the painting of the Sistine Chapel. EverGreene workers digitized Rockburne's image and printed it at full size onto five-foot-wide sheets of paper. They perforated the lines of the drawing with a "pounce wheel," which rolls something like a pizza cutter to pierce the paper and leave tiny holes. Tuesday, artists from EverGreene -- under Rockburne's supervision -- attached the paper to the canvas, took a bag of chalk and pounded it through the holes, leaving an outline of the image on the canvas.

The Queens museum is planning a series of activities to correspond with work on the piece over the summer. A reading room will be open in the gallery while the mural is painted, including books on astronomy, Jamaica and muralmaking. A video class for immigrants will focus on the making of Rockburne's work. Regular printouts of the night sky over Queens will be posted on the wall.

All of that leaves Rockburne satisfied.

"There's a mystery that can never be answered," she said, speaking of the mathematical structures that underlie all of nature. "I try to paint that mystery in everything I do."

© 2009 The Washington Post Company