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News

Speaking up for urban nature
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South End artist Christos Hamawi paints in the Back Bay Westin hotel's employee wing. Hamawi found his inspiration for the mural in a picture of eucalyptus leaves on the nature-centered hotel's website. (Source:Kate Vander Wiede)

South End artist Christos Hamawi shares the city's unique beauty with the public

It's bright. You walk the length of the wooden bridge, appreciating the blue cloud-filled sky above you. You look around and notice that the top of your head is even with the top of the eucalyptus trees, whose giant leaves dance around you on their branches. You sigh, smiling. This is the life.

But you're not in the jungle - you're standing in a fifth floor hallway of the Back Bay Westin hotel. And the light isn't coming from the sun; it's from the newly installed, environmentally friendly LED bulbs. In the middle of the hallway, you find yourself surrounded not by a jungle, but by the 1,200-square-foot mural that South End artist Christos Hamawi has spent the last month and a half painting.

"It's going to be called 'Rising Above,'" says Hamawi, looking down the length of the 65-foot hallway, noting the detailing and touching up he has to do before he finishes. "It's about people who have reached the upper echelon of the forest."

The mural, commissioned by the Westin, is also about celebrating the Westin employees, especially those who have, in their work there, reached the top echelon of performance.

"We wanted to spruce it up, we wanted to make it a more inviting kind of atmosphere and also to thank the employees for all the hard work they do every day," says the Westin's general manager Michael Jorgensen of the hallway, which he says is a main thoroughfare for employees. "Everybody travels through there at least once a day."

After noticing Hamawi painting a nature-inspired design on an electrical box right beneath their offices, an executive approached Hamawi to see if he'd be interested in proposing an

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idea for the space.

At the time, the hallway wasn't much to look at. A gray wall was adorned with thick wavy lines and pasted-up stars displayed names of employees of the month. (Employee of the month plaques will now go up on individual eucalyptus leaves.) Multi-colored fluorescent lighting barely lit up the space.

"It was very dark," says housekeeping employee and South End resident Mohammad Osman, who sat in the employee kitchen eating lunch on Tuesday afternoon, June 1.

Kitchen supervisor Lionel Mornot agrees.

"Before, it was pretty dead. But now when you get off the elevator, you feel like 'Oh my gosh, that looks like heaven,'" he says, enthused.

The mural actually sports one of Hamawi's simpler designs, but it shares the underlying theme that all of his work these days aims to illustrate: the beauty of nature in an urban environment.

"The city has nature growing wild in some of the most amazing places that you would never expect," explains Hamawi, noting the scenes he has found on long walks through the North End, Chinatown, the Financial District, the Waterfront District and the South End. His inspiration, he says, is literally everywhere - dandelions on sidewalks, leaves growing in street grates, weeds peeking their heads through cracks in pavement.

Through his work, Hamawi hopes to inspire the city's residents to see the beauty right under their noses.

"[My work] is to get people to think more about nature and its resilience and its determination, and how we are invading its space - yet look at it as if it's invading ours," says Hamawi of what he calls his "Urban Wilds" theme.

This current focus is a fresh angle for Hamawi. While he has always had an eye for nature, most of Hamawi's earlier paintings displayed literal depictions of things like roses, orchids and clearings of trees. He dabbled in urban nature in 1997 while living in Croatia, but a bigger shift came after he moved to Boston, during a walk around his old Shawmut Avenue studio.

Coming across dandelions and grasses growing on the side of the road near Ringgold Park, Hamawi found himself intrigued by the beauty of the wild plants. They inspired his "Lazy Summer" painting, and pushed him to start looking for less classic and more hidden nature scenes.

He's found hundreds of these scenes on subsequent walks around the city - he has a collection of 300 photos of "Urban Wilds" examples. He describes one scene he found across from his current Mass. Ave studio, on an asphalt-paved, empty lot.

"There were clovers and timothy grass and other grasses just ripping out through the sidewalk," he remembers.

At the time, he got on his knees, and with ambulances and traffic racing past just feet away, brought his face close to the ground,

looking up at the grasses towards the sky.

"I just thought I could be in the middle of a meadow and here I am, on the busiest street in the city, and it's just complete tranquility when I look at this," he smiles.

Former neighbor Mark Allen says Hamawi's representation of his subjects is striking.

"He has this ability to render humble grasses in very mythic ways, without seeming to be surreal or overly bizarre," Allen notes, adding that a print of the Mass. Ave scene now hangs on his office wall.

Pulling out his iPhone, Hamawi exhibits a picture he recently took on a walk of plants that steadily and healthily growing beneath the surface of the road, inside a grate. He says if he were to paint the scene, he would do so without showing the grate, because he never includes human aspects in any of his work.

"It's too literal for me. I want people to look at it and think that it could be anywhere," he explains.

But for all the human aspects he leaves out of his paintings, Hamawi himself is a talkative and friendly people person.

"He has the patience of Job," laughs John Zawislak, the Westin's assistant outlet manager who first approached Hamawi on behalf of the hotel.

Zawislak says that he often hears employees asking the same question of the artist over and over, day after day, but Hamawi never gets annoyed.

"He gives them that undivided attention and while he's working away, fills the staff in on what he's doing," says Zawislak.

In fact, it is this interaction with people that Hamawi cherishes about doing public art. He's now worked on several public art projects - the three electrical boxes (in Downtown Crossing, on Mass. Ave - a painting also inspired by the timothy grass scene - and in Copley Square) and the Westin commission.

"It's so exciting to be able to do that and to get feedback and to see the excitement on the faces of people who walk by and ask questions," Hamawi says.

Hamawi is hoping more public art possibilities arise in the future. An involved community member, he has served on the Worcester Square Area Neighborhood Association (WSANA) for years, was a part of the Massachusetts Avenue Reconstruction Committee and is now a WSANA representative on the Harrison-Albany Corridor Study Advisory Group. As an artist, he is also advocating for developers of the Harrison-Albany area to integrate ideas for public art in their designs.

Noting that past civilizations are often known for their art and culture - from paintings to dance to music - Hamawi says that incorporating culture into the city is vitally important for Boston's future.

"What kind of message are we leaving behind to future generations if we don't think about all these aspects of our city that make it unique and diverse and interesting?" he asks.

Personality and a focus on beautifying the community through all art, and not just his own, sets Hamawi apart, according to Allen.

Allen remembers when Hamawi planted a garden back when he lived on Appleton Street, and then went on to plant and maintain a garden for an older gentleman who wanted one but didn't have the ability to do it himself.

"He's a really good spirit," Allen says, "the kind of guy you really want to have as a neighbor."

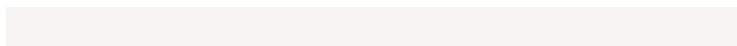
And it seems this is the kind of neighbor Hamawi is no matter where he goes. Answering questions while touching up mural clouds, Hamawi smiles at and greets people as they pass through the hallway. He appears to know everyone.

This friendly demeanor is what Zawislak says employees will remember for years to come.

"Once he's gone and the mural is there, the memory of him being here and his interaction with the staff," Zawislak says, trailing off for a moment before finding the words. "It's something that you can't put a price on."

Hamawi is planning to have a September show featuring his "Urban Wilds" pieces, and is working with Washington Gateway Main Street to come up with an empty retail space to use. To see his work, or for information about the show, see his website at www.bluebrickstudios.com.

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