

ART SMART



DREAMS AND VISIONS

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We need more murals. The poster child for this cause is the magnificent Planet Ocean mural that collars the Long Beach Arena. Chronically misidentified as the Aquarium of the Pacific, this 1992 hydrospheric birthday cake to the city proffers the gift of civic pride upon every sighting by land, sea or air. Even automotive champions can't resist its whale song; the 35th Annual Toyota Grand Prix raced around this marine lighthouse in its own special horse-powered way. Robert Wyland, the "whaling wall" muralist (born in Detroit, raised in Madison Heights, Michigan), released his Gray, Orca, Blue, and Pilot whales into the consciousness of Long Beach with so many strokes of his brush. Needless to say, our city henceforth will always have whales on its mind.

Scott Blumenthal, an incessant salesman and, like Wyland, an avid mural entrepreneur, recently formed Dreams & Visions Art Company, a family-based illustration business dedicated to painting murals wherever blandness cries out. Together with his wife Christi, his son-in-law Abner and daughter Laura, Scott constantly scans commercial and fine art horizons for visual deficiencies that his family crew can remedy. As Scott puts it: "People need art, and we have a lot to give." Abner and Laura's recent visit to their children's pediatrician provides notable example.

Karing Pediatrics at St. Mary Medical Center sits near the nondescript corner of Atlantic and Tenth Street. Quite bland visually, the off-white, no-nonsense modernist style of its facade at turns recedes and emerges from the adjacent and like-colored hospital parking structure behind it.

Inside Karing, the main waiting area sulks in similar visual boredom, an empty aquarium tank thirsty for life. This is a paradoxical observation, as in conjectured general reality and specific to my visit, I was eyewitness to parents holding, standing and sitting with children, children and more children everywhere along the perimeter and receding center space.

I imagined Abner and Laura sitting here with their children, dazed, regarding the fray and then looking up to an underwater vision on the ceiling that, if realized, could pacify nervous children and beleaguered parents alike. An inquiry was made with the Head Administrator, Teri Tan, and a deal was struck. Dreams & Visions started painting, transforming the drab walls and indifferent ceiling of the waiting room into a beckoning underwater odyssey of brightly colored marine life swimming towards a healing sun. Inner corridors leading to exam rooms soon gave way to butterflies, birds, and bees that twittered around somber medical posters, on subjects like "Rash Illness in Children" and "Understanding Asthma". Exam rooms at the clinic were rehydrated with the illustrated comforts of comic book fantasy and nursery rhyme nature.

"When you walk around now, it's really just 'Wow,'" Tan says.



Mural painting is a gift: from its humble, prehistoric beginnings on damp walls and ceilings of torch-lit Lascaux caves to imperial Egyptian tombs encoded in hieroglyphic swaths of eternity; from Roman villas at Pompeii, where artisans celebrated their patrons' economic and social prosperity on walls doomed to a premature burial, on through early 20th-century Mexico, where Diego Rivera and his "muralista" comrades championed the dignity of the worker. In each of these examples, can we not construe "the writing on the wall" as a gesture of giving?

While it's safe to say that people see what they want to see (and assign desired meaning), isn't it at least important that people do get to see and interpret something when they turn a street corner or building corridor? Isn't an illustrated life preferable to none? ■

Photos courtesy of Dreams & Visions Art Company.