



KARI JOHNSON SPENT 2 MONTHS ON THE NEW COZMIC MURAL

PHOTO: TRASK BEDORTHA

PEACEABLE KINGDOM

Kari Johnson's new mural at Cozmic is an exercise in harmony

Boobs. That's what men on the street stopped to talk to Kari Johnson about when she was painting the "4th and Monroe" mural. *What's wrong with her boobs? Hey, she's missing a boob!* They would holler. The year was 1991, and Johnson was painting her first Eugene mural on a residential building in the Whit, featuring, at its focal point, a nude elder who has undergone a mastectomy. Crouching in a bed of pink coneflowers, the woman is a study of strength and grace as she gazes at her public audience: Her hands raise overhead, clutching a hissing snake, framing a head of silver tendrils and revealing a scar where her right breast once was.

When Johnson explained that she was depicting a cancer survivor, she says the male passersby would grow quiet and share that, they too, had a sister, a mother, a partner, who was diagnosed with cancer.

"It's people's favorite mural," Johnson says with surprise in her voice. "The most intense mural that I painted — people love it!"

Twenty-two years and 22 murals later, Johnson has come to a conclusion: "People don't want just a pretty mural." From Eugene to New York City to Mexico, Johnson has been telling stories of sexism, patriarchy, poverty and environmental collapse with a glowing, soft photorealism. Johnson is not only an artist, she's an activist — a feminist and anarchist who puts her political views front and center. So when she was commissioned to redo the mural that spans the north interior wall of Cozmic and Theo's Coffeehouse — one with imagery inspired by the Peaceable Kingdom from the Bible — she wasn't sure what to expect.

"They said 'No nudity,'" Johnson says, laughing. "I was like, 'That's fine. It's not something I have to do.'"

Jim Tedrick, managing editor at Wipf and Stock Publishers (located a level above Cozmic), acted as the liaison between the building's owners (members of the Church of the Servant King, which Tedrick attends) and potential artists for the new mural. Cozmic owner Kirk Giudici tipped Tedrick off to Johnson's talents, and soon Tedrick and Johnson were discussing what the mural would be.

"The mural was over 10 years old and showing signs of wear," Tedrick says of the original. "We wanted to restore it because it was really well-loved." The old mural was so well loved that many patrons were upset when they found out the mural could not be restored and Tedrick and Johnson were moving forward with a new concept.

"There were two concepts I wanted the mural to reflect," Tedrick explains. "We really wanted a Willamette Valley, Oregon-looking mural. The second was playing off some images of the Peaceable Kingdom ... People living in peace with one another and with nature." The duo would continue to collaborate over the two-month period during the summer of 2013 while Johnson was painting.

"I love the process. I love working with people," Johnson says. "Flesh out their vision and do it even better — make it better than they could ever imagine." She adds, noting that she's an animist and not a Christian, "It was something, like interpreting their mission view and making it make sense to me. It wasn't that hard though. I mean, a celebration and a gathering and a coming together of all the people? That's not a problem."

Sitting at a table in Cozmic in September, Johnson points to the top left corner of the mural. "I did put the lion with the lamb." Then she fans her hand in front of the mural's middle section where people are working in tall grasses. "Wetland restoration," she says. "There's restoration to be done for a few thousand years. So I wanted to show that." She turns her focus to the mural's centerpiece, "That's the feast." And it's an exuberant one that Johnson handled with a masterful and warm touch — laughing faces, a juicy watermelon next to a roast pig, chess players, a child on her father's lap.

"I wanted to show fatherhood and really respect the nurturing part of fatherhood," says Johnson, who used one of Cozmic's cooks with his baby as a model. More local faces and places are sprinkled throughout, next to images of people Johnson found on the internet.

The focal point, however, is one woman seated at the center of the table. "I'm going to show women as being the main characters," Johnson says. "That's not something you're going to see in TV very much or the movies." The woman's face, framed by a black scarf, open and facing the viewer, radiates with laughter. "People need to see old women laughing and being the center of society."

The expansive mural's end result is two visions in harmony. "I love it. I think that she's incredibly talented. I didn't expect nearly the richness and detail she brought to the space," Tedrick says. "People ended up really loving the new mural, and they didn't think they would."

With its life-size scale it's hard to resist the mural's spell, creating a sense that you could take a seat at the feast and pour yourself a glass of vino. The next best option? Grab a beer and see if you can spot the locals — be that people, places or local issues. ■