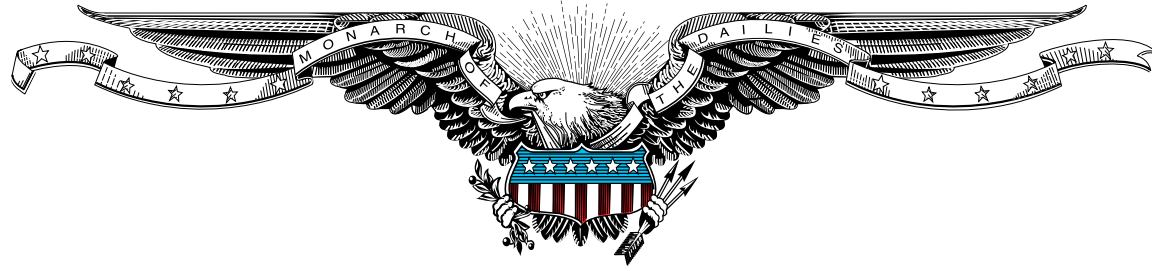




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FANFARE

Meet the local artist painting The City's first on-street mural

Public art installation coincides with the opening of downtown's newest pedestrian plaza

By James Salazar Examiner staff writer • May 23, 2022 3:30 pm - Updated May 23, 2022 5:29 pm



Claudio Talavera-Ballón stands in front of the street mural he painted on the Battery Street Bridge near Market Street. (Craig Lee/The Examiner)

Downtown San Francisco is not exactly a bucolic place. But for Peruvian artist Claudio Talavera-Ballón, who is painting San Francisco's first on-street mural for its newest pedestrian plaza, bringing the beauty of the Point Reyes National Seashore to the heart of The City has felt obvious, even necessary.

Talavera-Ballón's inspiration for his 1,900-square-foot mural is Point Reyes' Drakes Esteron estuary. "I want to celebrate the nature that surrounds us here in the Bay Area, also in hopes the mural can serve as a reminder to protect the richness and fragility of nature," he said.

On Battery Street between Bush and Market streets, the plaza now known as Battery Bridge was closed to vehicles in 2020 during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, thanks to a collaboration with the Downtown Community Benefit District (Downtown SF), the plaza and its mural will serve as one of downtown's few green — and blue — spaces.

The mural depicts the Pacific Ocean as well as the surrounding forests, farmlands, marshes and shrublands that make up the estuary. Talavera-Ballón calls his work "Estero en Movimiento" (Estuary in Motion).

Talavera-Ballón found out about the project through Artspan, a San Francisco organization that links local artists with projects.

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The mural is the latest addition to Battery Bridge's development. The plaza's initial closure allowed for the installation of planters as well as an asphalt repaving. Tishman Speyer, owner of the One Bush Street tower that overlooks the plaza, worked with Downtown SF on the art installation.

"To be very literal about it, we think of downtown as a canvas," said Claude Imbault, Downtown SF's deputy director. The organization, which serves 43 blocks of the Financial District and Jackson Square, offers design and beautification improvements.

Imbault developed the mural with inspiration from Bloomberg Philanthropies' Asphalt Art Initiative, which "responds to the growing number of cities around the world embracing art as an effective and relatively low-cost strategy to improve and enrich their streets."

He considered the Battery Bridge plaza a "great space to do something that's unique and fun and whimsical and welcoming."

Melissa Buckminster, Downtown SF's marketing and communications manager, added, "It's very clear that our district needs to adapt in this later stage of COVID. We can't just be a nine-to-five office district. ... There's creativity, there's beauty, there's public spaces for people to utilize. It's not just for guys in suits that work in the Financial District. This is everybody's downtown."

Talavera-Ballón said he was eager to take on the project because "public art, such as murals, can revitalize public spaces, adding color, vibrancy and character to the urban environment."

Studying graphic design in Peru, Talavera-Ballón was introduced to art techniques such as watercolors, pastels and charcoal.

"The moment I started to paint, I realized how much I really loved it and that it was for me," he said.

After college, Talavera-Ballón met Luis Palao Berastain, a painter whose work captures indigenous people and farm workers, through a chance encounter on the street. The two exchanged numbers after Talavera-Ballón expressed his wish to become an artist, and eventually Berastain took Talavera-Ballón under his wing.

The Battery Bridge mural has presented a slew of challenges for Talavera-Ballón, as it is his first time painting on asphalt.

Before taking chalk outlines or brush strokes to the pavement, he had to research which materials would work best with the surface. He also had to consider the mural's perspective as its location on the plaza meant that visitors would look down at his work.

Through his apprenticeship with Berastain, Talavera-Ballón learned to not "be afraid of the blank canvas because a little fear always surfaces when the artist faces a blank canvas," he said.

Talavera-Ballón's biggest learning curve throughout the past two months of work has been "learning how to paint while engaging in and practicing some interesting physical positions, such as being on all fours all day long," he said. "I am extremely grateful for whoever invented knee pads."

He is also grateful for the varied public input. "When you are in the process of creating public art, it is wonderful to have direct contact and feedback and input from people," said Talavera-Ballón. "The interaction and dialogue that this generates is a very rewarding experience."

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