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## Making a mastodon feel right a home

ABBY LUBY • FOR THE POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL • NOVEMBER 15, 2009

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If you're an artist, finding work in your creative field is tough; especially during this depressed job market and especially if you're an art student in high school or college.

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Surprisingly, five young female artists, ages 16 to 23, were recently hired for their artistic skills to work on a new project at the Mid-Hudson Children's Museum in the City of Poughkeepsie.

Their charge: Paint and build an exhibit for the museum's towering mastodon skeleton, the famous Hyde Park Mastodon, the museum's newest show.

The exhibit is the brainchild of local artist and designer Jeff Johnson, who teaches design at the State University of New York at New Paltz and Dutchess Community College.

For the project, Johnson needed a diverse team of skilled artists who could make his concepts and ideas come alive. The artists would need to follow directions from the mural designer using their knowledge of perspective and sense of color. They also needed to know how to use power tools to construct a climbable tree, a dig pit and a see-through wall kids could peek through for that special, close-up view of the 14,000-year-old beast.

In June, Johnson cast a wide net in his search. By the time the project started in July, five female artists were hired: Michelle Hersh, 26; Kara Atlas, 23; Geena Rose, 21; Hope Weissman, and Margot Madalengoitia, 16.

The footprint of the project posed unique challenges.

Johnson's design placed the 12-foot-high skeleton, hanging, tusks first, over and into the

museum's stairwell with its feet planted on the second floor, prehistoric landscape.

The mural's realistic portrait of the now extinct furry mastodon would face its now skeletal self, both sets of tusks reaching over several millennia, almost touching.

From the bottom of the stairwell, the scene of ancient aquatic sediment evolves with changing flora and fauna as children ascend the stairs.

Mural artist and designer Ben Sears, a former Poughkeepsie resident now living in Massachusetts, created the original images the artists had to sketch out and then paint onto large plywood boards.



Geena Rose, left, and Hope Weissman work on the Hyde Park Mastodon Project. (Photos courtesy of Jeff Johnson Courtesy of Mid-Hu)

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**Information:** Visit [www.mhcm.org](http://www.mhcm.org) or call 845-471-0589.

### On the Web

A clip of the young artists in action working on the exhibit is at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0\\_ELL1SgqA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0_ELL1SgqA)

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"We first sketched out what we thought we needed to start painting," said Rose, a student majoring in visual arts at SUNY New Paltz whose family lives in Poughkeepsie. "We had to mix the colors and come up with the right shading. It was always a team decision about what colors would work best."



Planning and dividing up sections of the mural was also done by consensus.

"We gave ourselves about a week to do each section of the mural," said Weissman, a student majoring in illustration at Parsons The New School for Design in New York City.

Weissman lives in Westchester and commuted to the museum via Metro-North during the project.

"The mastodon (section) was done in a week and it took another week to paint the section with the condor flying over the pond," she said.

Working collaboratively was new for the young artists, who are used to creating their art solo and by themselves.

"Working with new people was interesting," said Madalengoitia, a Poughkeepsie resident who is a high school sophomore at a school in Massachusetts. "You had to figure out what part of the work each person would do and how to listen to each other and get other points of view."

Much of the time the artists had to start work late because during the day, throngs of energetic youngsters running around the museum became naturally curious and asked them many questions about the new exhibit.

Although responding to the questions was exhilarating for the artists, it slowed the work somewhat.

Painting the murals started outside in the museum's pavilion where the mastodon skeleton was stored and could be used as a reference.

Together, the young painters created their own original mural for the landscape behind the mastodon. They painted a large tree with branches that blended in with the lofty creature's environment with sporadic, clear holes in the mural for children to peer out at the expansive brown bones.

Johnson designed a tree structure so kids could climb up to the mastodon's eye level to see how high the ancient beast really stood.

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**Abby Luby is a freelance writer. Reach her at [life@poughkeepsiejournal.com](mailto:life@poughkeepsiejournal.com).**

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Geena Rose, left, and Hope Weissman work on the Hyde Park Mastodon Project. (Photos courtesy of Jeff Johnson Courtesy of Mid-Hu)

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Atlas and Hersh constructed small platforms for kids to hoist themselves up in the tree.



Geena Rose, left, and Hope Weissman work on the Hyde Park Mastodon Project. (Photos courtesy of Jeff Johnson Courtesy of Mid-Hu)

The platforms were painted to look like the inside rings of a tree and were surrounded by slats resembling tree bark for small hands to hold onto in the climb.

"We had to figure out the best way to cut layers of plywood that would be part of the crawling structure," said Atlas, an art teacher in Minisink Valley and a graduate of SUNY New Paltz.

Both Atlas and Hersh cut numerous layers of plywood, glued and laminated them together forming the thick, inner floors of the tree.

They also worked on a dig pit using the same method, ending up with an organic structure containing sand and "fossils" for budding young paleontologists.

"It felt really nice to work with power tools like a router, a jigsaw and an angle grinder," said Hersh, who lives in New Paltz and who studied with Johnson about three years ago at SUNY New Paltz. "I also learned a lot about structure and which materials to use to make things strong and safe."

Ten years ago, the bones of the mastodon were found buried in the ooze under a pond in Hyde Park.

Paleontologists flew to the scene to dig out some 310 bones of the extinct relative of the elephant family who lived around 15 million years ago and whose disappearance started in North America about 10,000 years ago.

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The Hyde Park Mastodon was a major find and was featured on the History Channel in 2007.

Once the bones were assembled, a cast was made for exhibition purposes at the museum. The real bones are stored at the Museum of the Earth in Ithaca.

"The exhibit grabs the kids' attention and they can interact with it," said Ed Glisson, executive director of the museum. "The hope is that the kids will explore the environment the mastodon lived in, the vegetation, the colder climate, and wonder what it was like to live then."

Filling out the artistic crew and overseeing production was Alexis Feldheim, Kathleen Gavin, Jeep Johnson,

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Eddie Taylor, Jenna Homsey and Jeff Feldheim.

The heavy lifters carrying the several-hundred-pound mastodon skeleton from the pavilion to the stairwell included Ed Felton, Anthony Petrocelli and John Lutonski.

As for the young female artists, the work gave them a sense of accomplishment and affirmed their identities as artists.

"This was a really awesome experience," Rose said. "It made me have hope as an artist and I know there are artistic things out there I can do, enjoy and get paid for it at the same time."

Atlas said she is sharing her experience with her students.

"I've been talking to them about the mastodon project and what I was doing. I explain about how the girls painted the mastodon in such a way that it literally walks off the wall."

**Abby Luby is a freelance writer. Reach her at** [Previous Page](#) [1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#)  
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