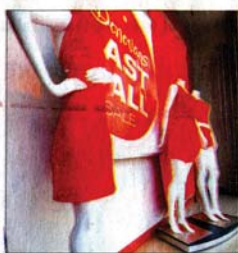




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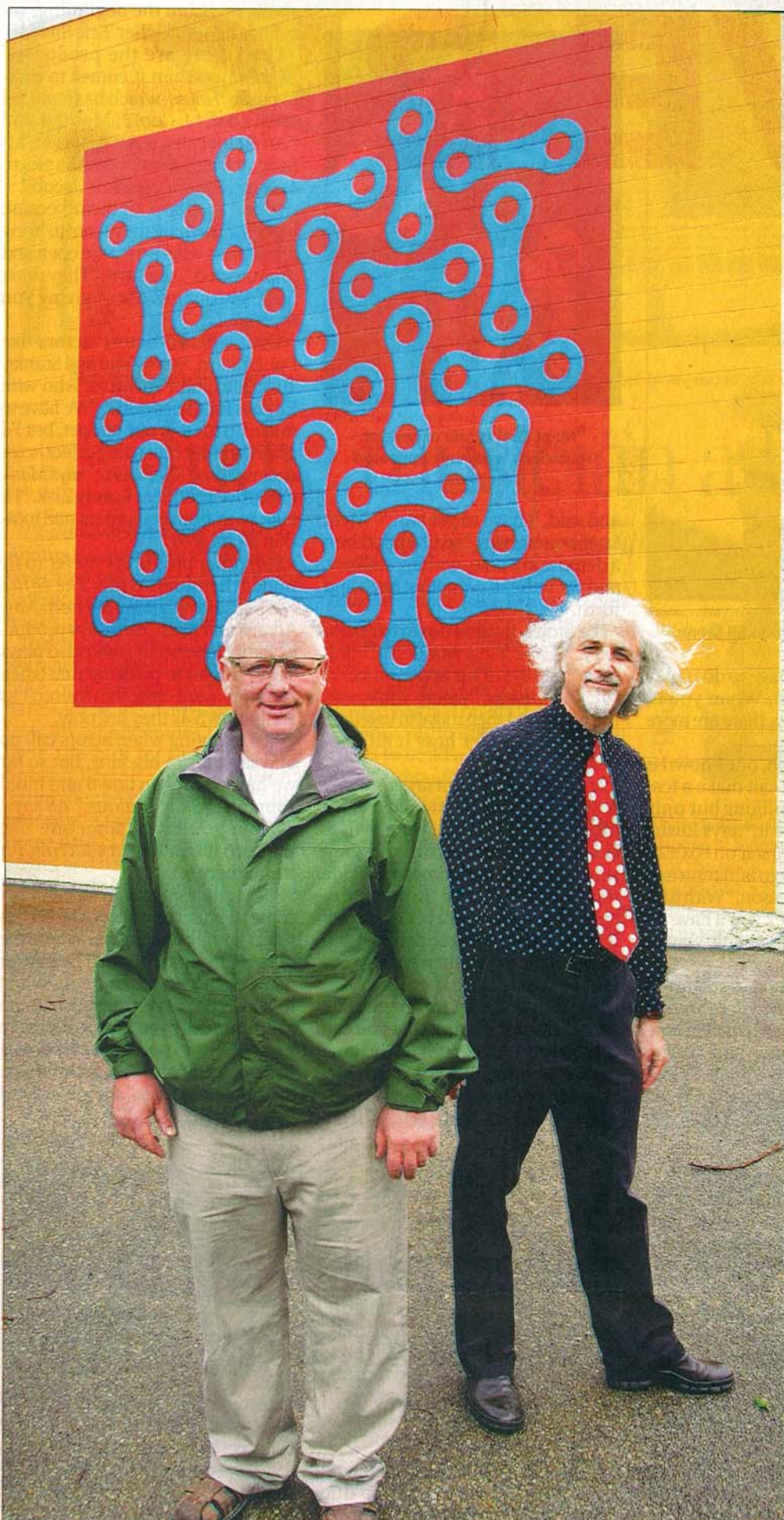
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EDMONTON JOURNAL / TUESDAY, JULY 21, 2009



Edmonton real estate agent Joe Clare, left, and Vancouver artist James K-M unveil *Free Rain*, a mural that Clare paid K-M to have painted on the wall of his commercial building in Strathearn.

CHRIS SCHWARZ, THE JOURNAL

Art for the people

Realtor and artist bring new colour to Strathearn

Paula Simons



Joe Clare isn't an artist. He's an Edmonton real estate agent who had a crazy dream — about murals.

One morning, he says, he woke up and saw a mural on the wall of an aging, nondescript commercial building he owns in Strathearn, home to Lee's Food Mart and a massage therapy supply outlet.

"It was totally abstract to me," he says. "I just saw colours on the wall."

Unable to get the vision out of his head, he set out to make it come true. But he didn't want a typical Edmonton wall mural, with pictures of historic figures or streetscapes. He wanted something more daring.

"Artists are very poor at getting their work out into the public. Or when they start talking about their work, they sound arrogant and defensive. I wanted to get art outside of the artist's workshop."

Through mutual friends, Clare connected with Vancouver painter and digital artist James K-M, went through his work, and was struck by a geometric piece called *Free Rain*.

Originally painted on a 60-cm-by-60-cm wood panel, the work features an intense deep-red background and a repeating grid pattern of bright, royal-blue loops — which look rather like bones, infinity loops or box wrenches. The strong primary colours, an eye-popping contrast, give the piece a kind of pulsing energy.

As soon as he saw it, Clare knew it was the piece for his bare grey wall. And so, for the last few weeks, Clare and a crew of six workers — many recruited from the Bissell Centre and the Salvation Army — have been working furiously to translate K-M's little painting into five-metre-by-five-metre form.

First, Clare painted the whole wall a deep golden yellow, to act as a kind of frame or backdrop to the artwork, proper. Then came the bright red square. Then, via giant stencils, the blue loops. In all, Clare estimates, the project has cost him roughly \$12,000 of his own money.

"I'm a little bit driven," he concedes. "It's a huge undertaking to do something like this. I've done everything. It's just about killed me."

For his part, K-M, whose work is quite intimate, had never done a mural before — but he couldn't resist Clare's passion.

"I wasn't sure what I was getting into, but his enthusiasm convinced me. He was on a mission of some sort, like the Blues Brothers," says the artist.

K-M says the title, *Free Rain*, is both a play on the "free rein" — meaning liberated — and a nod to the fact the abstracted blue shapes in the painting are reminiscent of raindrops.

"As rain, I see the shapes 'falling' in four directions; up, down, side to side," reads an entry on his website. "Why not? And it's not that rain can or can't do that. It's that (metaphysical and physical) nature can form many patterns that represent our metaphysics and collective unconscious, and that nature and metaphysics are always in dialogue with each other. And therein lies the poetry of life and what art is supposed to represent."

Technically, he says, turning the small painting into a giant wall mural wasn't such a challenge.

"It was fairly easy to translate. It was already graphed out, so I blew it up, as I would a digital image."

But he says he's still adjusting to the idea of having his work seen in such an accessible, public place.

"I'm so isolated here in Vancouver; isolated by choice. This metaphysical kind of work that I'm doing is such a private relationship with the invisible," he says.

But while K-M says Edmontonians may have to "learn the language" of his work, he's not too worried about reaction to the mural.

"Art is subjective. But art is always public," he says. "Sure, there's a risk of being misunderstood by the public. But the job of the artist is to be subtle, careful and risky. My sanity is at risk when I paint. That's always the risk when the artist or the creator ventures into these metaphysical realms — to go and ultimately come back. That's the only kind of risk that matters."

Free Rain isn't the kind of figurative work Edmontonians are used to seeing in a mural. And this painting is going to be seen. The wall is on a quiet side street, but it's clearly visible from busy Connors Road.

So how will Edmonton react? The usual complaint about public art is that it's a waste of public funds, money that could be used to fill those proverbial potholes. But this mural was a private venture, paid for by one property-owning patron with a passion for abstract art. It's the kind of private initiative and crazy guerrilla creativity we need much more of in this buttoned-down city.

Joe Clare sees it all as an investment in a neighbourhood he loves.

"It's really a community project. And I'm a community kind of guy."

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