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## Maria Friske's roadside attraction

*Folk artist passes through Swillburg history with Pembroke Street mural*

By Frank De Blase

Maria Friske moves frenetically about the colorful chaos of her Roosevelt Street studio. With sketches scattered across the floor amidst paper-plate pallets full of swirls, and larger renderings lining the walls, you don't know where to look first. Yet walking through her studio you simply can't stop looking everywhere. The intense colors, the characters, and the story they tell are all a glimpse into Rochester history and culture --- and into the artist's mind.

Friske speaks in excited bursts as her ideas tumble out on top of one another. She's a barefoot blur bopping from study to study to add, subtract or contemplate. This is clearly a consuming passion. And it's a passion you quickly adopt when gazing upon her work from her perspective and then, ultimately, your own. It plays out like an American folk song where, despite our shared experiences, each listener takes away something different.



Frank De Blase

And like the singer who sings that song, Maria Friske is as wrapped up in the Americana she paints.

"I consider myself an American painter," she says. "And a regionalist right down to the neighborhood level. What I like to find and explore in my painting is aspects of American culture --- our common aspects, or most common experiences --- and re-introduce them to Americans as culture."

The characters and themes in Friske's paintings are larger than life and proportionately askew. They skirt a kind of abstract fringe and yet seem more real than what they depict or imply. They breathe. Culturally and spiritually her work is utterly human.

In keeping with this scale-breaking, rule-busting, locally-centric approach, Friske --- an adjunct professor at Nazareth and U of R --- is deep into work on her biggest piece yet: a chronological, pictorial narrative of the history of the Swillburg neighborhood from the 1700s to present. The piece is currently being painted on five 5'x10' steel panels and the completed installation will be mounted on the I-490 wall on Pembroke Street between Goodman Street and Monroe Avenue in August.

**When the Swillburg Neighborhood** Association decided to commission a piece of public art for the area, President David Chappius began interviewing artists. It wasn't long before he arrived at Friske.

"I talked to a couple of people and I just didn't get the feeling that I got when I talked to Maria," Chappius says. "And I said 'Wow, I betcha I've found my woman.' When I talked with her we just really connected and I just got a great vibe from her. It was instant. And I said 'You know what? If we

get this grant, you're gonna be the one."

Funding in the amount of \$16,492 came through The Arts & Cultural Council's Culture Builds Communities Grant Program in February and Friske dug in.

The initial concept of five panels depicting significant points in the neighborhood's history was created within the neighborhood's committee. "As far as the actual design, that's all her," Chappius says. "She came up with all that and we just ate it up."

"I spent three months going to libraries, historical societies, pulling photos, sketching, thinking about it," she says. The initial sketches and subsequent color studies began to pile up in her attic studio.

Friske began painting in late May, with help from a handful of assistants. The huge steel plates line the walls of her garage. Now full-steam into the project, Friske pinballs between panels and themes in a flash. She works on the eye of Sky Woman one moment, then changes the tone around Cab Calloway the next. This project spans centuries, yet she paints it as a whole sewn together with the Swillburg neighborhood as its common thread.

"Swillburg is a triangle," she says. "This was an important corner in a lot of things that happened." At various points in time this area featured East-West paths used by Native Americans, housed Lock 66 when the canal went through, and was a subway stop.

"But there was so much more," she says her voice rising in pitch with her excitement. "Cab Calloway was born in this neighborhood, the Underground Railroad was in close proximity, Hillside started out here as an orphanage..."

**Each panel of the mural** has a time period and a theme.

The first panel, "The Creators Garden," covers the 18th and 19th centuries with symbolic and literal references to Native American deities and figures from what was primarily a matriarchal society. The Six Nations are represented, as are the peace paths (East-West) and war paths (North-South).

Panel two, "Always Know Your Neighbor," depicts the area in its early canal and pig-farming days. It was the early to mid-1800s and the Underground Railroad is represented along with a portrait of Frederick Douglass.

Between the mid-1800s to the 1920s, Swillburg began to take on more of a neighborhood feel. Panel three, "Always Know Your Pal," depicts children, schools, the orphanage at Pinnacle Hill, and a young Cab Calloway.

The early Rochester skyline begins to crack the horizon in panel four, "The Subway," with interior and exterior views of a subway car and current landmarks like the Highland Park Diner, Cinema Theatre, and Colgate Divinity.

"Currents" is the fifth and final panel. It depicts the neighborhood in modern times, and embodies the area's pride and spirit; consider the 1970s when the neighborhood protested, fought, and won against plans to run route 390 through its middle.

While each panel features a central, giant, point-of-interest character, a pig pops up --- or actually pops

out --- throughout all five sections.

"What I ended up doing was an abstract pig as a relief element," Friske says. "In all the subsequent panels it's abstract, but in the first one it's literal. Two-and-a-half D, I call it."

**Friske is painting the mural** with high-end acrylics blended with special polymers. The panels were initially coated to prevent rust and then primed. When she's done, the five pieces will be given an isolation coat and two coats of clear auto body finish with UV inhibitors. The damned thing should last forever.

Friske isn't concerned. Nor is she affected by its magnitude or the potential size of its audience. She just wants it to be seen, to be experienced.

"I saw it as an opportunity," she says. "I knew it was gonna be a long haul and a hard project and a big project for one person."

The project's mission is not unlike her own.

"I'm really trying to find what's cool in American culture," she says. "'Did you know this? Isn't this amazing?'" And go beyond the mural-y mural and give them the gift of some real art; something they're gonna really dig and find something new every time they look at it.

"I just hope what happens is first you notice 'Wow, what's that over there? That's cool,'" she continues. "Then you go up to it and start realizing there's really something there."

Maria Friske's Pembroke Street mural will be officially unveiled Wednesday, August 30, at 6 p.m. For more info log onto [www.swillburg.com](http://www.swillburg.com) or [www.mariafriske.com](http://www.mariafriske.com).

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