

Sandow Birk

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Seeing Jazz: Q&A With SFJazz Center

Mural Artists Sandow Birk and Elyse Pignolet



Preliminary design for "Jazz and the Afterlife"

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Detail of "Jazz and the City"/Courtesy
Henrik Kam/SFJAZZ Photographer

The SFJazz Center, the new \$64 million building designed specifically for jazz in San Francisco's Hayes Valley neighborhood that opened in late January, is a smart, three-story structure that blends steel, glass, concrete, and white oak to striking effect and contains an acoustically wondrous auditorium. The center's second floor features three tiled murals. Two of these are in public view in the upstairs lobby: One, titled "Jazz and the City," depicts storied San Francisco clubs, including Jimbo's Bop City, home to all-night jam sessions during the music's heyday, and the Keystone Korner, last of the city's iconic jazz rooms. Another, "Jazz and the Nation," references iconic jazz sites in New York and elsewhere in the United States. A third, in the Lester Young Green Room (named for the late saxophonist), titled "Jazz and the Afterlife," plays on Judgment Day paintings, imagining a swinging place for the damned.

These commissioned murals were created by the team of **Sandow Birk**, a Los Angeles-based artist whose past work has embraced social themes across a wide spectrum — inner-city violence, graffiti, prisons, skateboarding, and a consideration of the Qur'an as relevant to contemporary life in America; and **Elyse Pignolet**, an American of Filipino descent who grew up in Oakland, California, who works primarily in ceramics and

who often addresses the “permanence and traditions of ceramics with the fleeting and transitory nature of the contemporary world.”

I met Birk and Pignolet in San Francisco while covering the SFJazz opening for The Wall Street Journal. As waiters passed cocktails under the large red tent outside the center on opening night, the two artists described the long process of designing and installing the work. (A video documenting that process can be [viewed here](#).)

They shared their excitement at the prospect of at last seeing their murals in their functional setting, with concertgoers mingling before them. We caught up again, via email, to discuss the murals further.

How did this project come into your lives?

Birk: We were invited by Robert Mailer Anderson to apply for the commission to do some sort of murals in the building early on. He’s been a long time art collector and friend and he has also been involved in SFJazz for a long time, so he put our names forward as candidates for the mural projects. We have done several large-scale public projects before, so we knew the process of creating works for public spaces — the ups and the downs. We were thrilled at the possibility of doing the murals but also were dubious that we’d make it through to the final realization of the murals, since there are usually so many things that can go wrong, from the selection process to through the design stage and to the final fabrication and installation.

What were the parameters set by SFJazz? What did they ask for?

Birk: Contrary to what we expected, we actually got pretty free reign from concept through design of the images. We went into a pitch meeting in which we showed them our past work, proposed the idea of doing ceramic tile murals using blue and white “azulejo” colors drawing from historic tiles around the world, and then gave them a budget proposal. From that we were selected for the murals and went into the design phase.

Pignolet: It was understood after the first proposal meeting that the themes would be jazz, the history of jazz in San Francisco, and that we were to do ceramic tile murals in the “azulejo” tradition. After the initial proposal we did have the freedom to create our own concepts and compositions.

How did the process work, from idea to illustrations to crafting the tiles and installation?

Birk: It was a long process over nearly two years, mostly spent on the design. There was lots of research — from reading to watching old footage to discussions with musicians about jazz history.

Pignolet: Once the designs were finalized, we were able to project our images directly on the blank white tiles in a 10’ x 10’ section, rough sketch the final image, then paint with the ceramic under glazes, then clear glaze, then fire in the kiln. The fabrication took several months of us painting everyday. The installation was also done by us, it took about a month working everyday.

What can you tell me about your development of the style and techniques that are in evidence here?

Pignolet: I’ve always been attracted to this tradition of mural making. I like that our murals are tied to this long history of tile murals that can be seen in many cultures throughout the world.

Birk: Elyse and I have both been inspired by the azulejo murals that we’ve seen in Portugal and Mexico City, and other places we’ve spent time. Elyse has a background in ceramics and we knew we wanted to do the murals on tiles, especially since they are all in high-traffic areas in the building’s lobby and Green Room, where people will be leaning on them and maybe spilling drinks on them or rubbing against them during concert nights. So we wanted sturdy, solid murals that could stand up to that and that also drew on the global traditions and history of ceramic murals.

There’s so much bad jazz art out there – were there things you were consciously trying to avoid in approaching this project?

Birk: Yes, there’s a lot of “bad” jazz art. One of the things we did at the beginning of the process was to look at a lot of other artworks about jazz and decide what we didn’t want the murals to be — which was a procession of jazz greats playing their instruments, maybe floating in a rainbow haze with notes floating around. Paintings of people playing music is never as interesting as hearing music, and the greats of jazz are so well known and numerous that going that route would just be stepping

into a quicksand discussion of who's depicted and who isn't. Plus, the murals are right outside the door where you're going to be actually seeing the greats play, so you don't need to depict them. Once we knew what we didn't want, we started looking at how we might approach the history of jazz from a different angle. One of our early ideas was to somehow depict not the people of jazz, but the language of jazz, the slang from jazz history that has influenced American language. But that road got abandoned pretty early on.

Pignolet: We decided that since the murals were going to be in the place where jazz is played, that instead of showing the "people" of jazz we could show the "venues" of jazz. A history of jazz through the famous places of where jazz was played. This idea appealed to us because it felt very inclusive. By representing one iconic place for jazz in San Francisco, it stood for everyone who ever played within those walls for as many years as those walls stood up.

Were there other direct inspirations that have nothing to do with jazz?

Birk: We definitely were inspired by other paintings. As we said, the history murals of Lisbon were a huge inspiration, and we were also looking at the paintings of Brueghel and Hans Memling, his panoramic landscapes in which there are several scenes all happening at once and time is crunched together. Those are fantastic and we looked at a lot of those.

How do hope your work affects the concert-going experience?

Birk: Like we said earlier, we really thought about how the SFJazz Center is the place where jazz will be happening, so we wanted to viewers to think about other places where jazz has happened, through time and in other venues. When I think of jazz, I think of small, smoky clubs and bars, dark alleys, late nights, crowded rooms, spontaneity. SFJazz is fantastic, but it's not a small club, even though it's intimate. So we wanted to remind people of all the small clubs where jazz was born and thrived.

Pignolet: I guess I hope that we put enough details and thought into our murals and that people could possibly discover new things with each visit to SFJazz. The hope would be that the concertgoer could be interested in the murals over multiple viewings.

The "afterlife" one is in the Green Room, where really only musicians will see it. Did you approach this one differently?

Birk: Oh yeah, very much so. The first two murals in the lobby were envisioned almost as one mural, one cityscape spanning history and the nation. The Green Room mural is in a more private place, so it's much more about the joy and the fun and the party of jazz. It's a spoof on the tradition of religious "judgment day" murals, where club-goers are permitted past the velvet rope by a bouncer into the "afterlife," where a stern cop either sends them upstairs to heaven or down to hell. Those bound for heaven are relieved and elated, until they look down and see the scene raging in the nightclub of hell, while all the instruments not used in jazz are stuck in heaven, left out of the party.

So I guess we're all damned then, but enjoying it?

Birk: Sort of.