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Charlie Johnston, the artist behind the mural on the Levy's Leathers building, watches as it is sprayed over on Wednesday.

Longtime mural on Disraeli Freeway building painted over

Artist's 'Sistine Chapel' disappears

CAITLYN GOWRILUK

A MURAL that wrapped around 14,000 square feet of a South Point Douglas business was painted over Wednesday as the building's owner tries to sell the space.

It comes with the territory, according to the artist responsible for what had been one of Manitoba's largest wall paintings. "The way Buddhist monks wipe away a sand mandala after creating it, that's kind of the way of the world of street art," Charlie Johnston said. "You create something beautiful, (and) it exists for a time."

Johnston said when he created the *Layin' Down Tracks* mural in 2004 on the Disraeli Freeway building that housed Levy's Leathers, the accomplishment was the peak of his career. Company owner Dennis Levy gave him free rein, asking only that the mural incorporate music because Levy's specialized in guitar straps.

"It was a great opportunity," Johnston said Wednesday. "It was like painting my Sistine Chapel. It was the biggest piece I'd ever done."

He came up with a design that used the visual metaphor of laying down tracks to combine Winnipeg's railway history with its music scene: train tracks and piano keys, locomotives and audio cables, woven into a vivid tapestry.

"I really felt (it) epitomized the identity of Winnipeg," he said. "So I morphed the two ideas into each other."

Levy, who sold the business in January 2018 and seeks to sell the building, too, said the mural was exactly what he was looking for, but it's time for a change.

"When I was in business, I had always looked at things that would make my staff feel special or give them a sense of identity," he said. "Now, it's time to move on. I'm no longer in the music business, so I don't see the need to keep it on there."

It is the second of Johnston's murals to be covered up in less than a month: a towering portrait of Jesus Christ on the front of Transcona's Tabor Baptist Church (finished in 2007) was painted over with a coat of grey as the church rebrands itself.

Johnston said the city's mural-art scene has changed since he created the Disraeli Freeway piece.

"I've painted enough artwork to cover 11 acres. More than half of that is gone," he said. "When I was doing this piece, I was seeking to set the bar — and that bar has been set, achieved and raised several times over since."

Still, he said he feels the pangs of regret each time it happens: for himself, and for the community who enjoyed his work for so long.

"The core idea about public art and murals is that they are free to everyone and accessible to everyone," he said. "That's the gift of the project to a community, and when the piece gets lost, that gift is taken away."

caitlyn.gowriluk@freepress.mb.ca
Twitter: @caitlyngowriluk

North Kildonan residents concerned by low-floating balloon

MAGGIE MACINTOSH

NORTH KILDONAN residents say they spotted a near miss on Friday night when a hot air balloon flew over the neighbourhood at building height.

A yellow balloon was spotted floating near the intersection of Henderson Highway and Chief Peguis Trail on Friday around 8 p.m.

"It was so low, I actually thought they were making an emergency landing on top of one of the apartment buildings," resident Mitch Paul said.

Paul said the basket appeared to be around 20 storeys high — adjacent to the top of a nearby apartment building.

It's rare to see a hot air balloon in the residential area, but the low height is what took him by surprise, so much so he decided to walk around the neighbourhood to see if he could figure out where it had landed.

When he didn't find it, Paul said he was concerned it was flying so low it could have "easily" crashed into a power line

or a tall building.

Sundance Balloons said the balloon launched from a park in the area that night.

It climbed to a normal flight altitude and the pilot and all passengers had "a calm, magical flight and a great landing," office manager Judy McGonigle said in a statement via email.

McGonigle added it is difficult to distinguish height and perspectives from the ground and that the company operates with safety as a priority at all times.

Jennifer Rzedzian, a West St. Paul resident who often sees balloons in her neighbourhood, said the balloon was so unusually low that drivers were pulling over on the highway to stare and wave at its passengers.

Rzedzian said she was driving into the city when she spotted the balloon Friday and thought it might end up in the Red River.

"I was concerned that someone would be hurt," she said.

"We could see the people's faces in the balloon — usually, you just see the balloon, you don't see who's inside."

The passengers looked happy from afar, which was a relief, she added. But Rzedzian said the sighting further reinforced her fear of heights.

Almost exactly 12 years ago, three people, including a pilot, suffered severe burns when a Sundance Balloons-owned hot air balloon attempting to land in strong winds near Birds Hill Provincial Park tipped over far enough to cause a fuel leak and uncontrollable fire.

Four others suffered minor injuries.

The incident sparked calls for tougher balloon safety standards and subsequent Transport Canada safety reviews.

Hot air balloon pilots and operators must comply with the Canadian Aviation Regulations just like all other aircraft pilots and operators.

Transport Canada regulations require flight crew licensing and training, aircraft registration, maintenance and operating procedures, including passenger safety briefings.

maggie.macintosh@freepress.mb.ca
Twitter: @macintoshmaggie

JENNIFER RZEDZIAN PHOTO

North Kildonan residents say a hot air balloon floating at building height had them worried about people's safety.