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Nereo II, 33, (left) and John Padua, 19, spray-painted the second part of the southwest underpass at The Forks, in conjunction with Synonym Art Consultation's Wall-to-Wall Mural + Cultural Festival happening this month.

In conversation with mural artists Nereo II and John Padua

PAINTING THE TOWN

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LAST week, Winnipeg artists Nereo II and John Padua were hard at work on a labour of love.

Nereo, 33, and mentee Padua, 19, spray-painted the second part of the southwest underpass at The Forks, in conjunction with Synonym Art Consultation's Wall-to-Wall Mural + Cultural Festival happening this month. They completed the first section — inspired by the Manitoba flag — around Canada Day.

"I wanted to do (a mural) that honours tradition and history, but had to do with moving forward. The white calf (in the bottom left corner)... is a symbol that good things are coming," Nereo said of the mural's first half.

The duo met about five years ago through one of Padua's teachers at Churchill High School and have been collaborating since.

They spoke with the *Free Press* about the importance of mentorship and Winnipeg's public art scene. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Free Press: What are you painting today?

Nereo: This one is inspired by a story of the two different worlds that are representative of a light and darkness that everyone carries. There's inspiration from the teachings of the Tao, to learn from both. There's always a balance between the masculine and the feminine, and it's good to learn from both. I decided to use my son as a central figure for many reasons. I wanted to honour him, but he also has heterochromia, which is two different coloured eyes. So I thought it would be a nice fit for this duality piece.

FP: Nereo, did you have an artistic mentor when you were younger?

Nereo: I had several. As far as artists, I learned a lot when I was — I didn't have legal walls to work with, I guess you could say. Most of my lessons were learned late at night, at three, four o'clock in the morning, when I was somewhere I shouldn't have been. But, hey, you learn a lot about speed and even working, in the dark. I learned a lot of techniques from a community of artists. They shared tips that they learned from either observation or experimenting on their own and then I kind of branched off and started to do my own thing. Guys like Fred Thomas, Mike Johnston, Pat Lazo, they were big in the graffiti art scene early and they still are. They're still doing some really great work. But those were the big dogs.

FP: How important is having that mentorship as a young artist getting started? Do you think you could have done it yourself without having those "big dogs" show you the way?

Nereo: They definitely have a big impact, they always do. I always say learning is a two-way street. Of course, the people who started paving the way have a lot to offer, but so do the young ones, too. You just keep evolving from the exchange.

FP: What have you learned from each other?

John Padua: It's hard to remember everything, but when certain scenarios come up, I can easily just remember what he taught me in those scenarios... He taught me a lot about spray painting and big murals.

Nereo: I think it's one thing to be able to do it on your own, but then to relay the information and translate it in a way that makes sense — break it down very fundamentally so that they can grasp the technique. I think there's a skill in that.

FP: I was reading a 2016 interview you did in *The Manitoban*, Nereo, where you were asking why there aren't more local artists painting back alleys. Now you're doing nearly that with this underpass (and a dozen murals will go up for Wall-to-Wall this month alone). What's changed?

Nereo: I was always hopeful it would head in that direction. It's funny because as soon as you work with spray paint as a medium, there's so much controversy around it and everything. Maybe some people are not as open or know the potential of what can be done with it. I think because of the negative reputation it has, I can see for that reason there hasn't been as much support (financially) to keep these programs going. But if you look at other cities like Toronto and Montreal, who have annual mural festivals, the amount of community and support they have for their artists is what helps them flourish and develop their skills. They become way better and don't run around hiding in dark corners, having rushed their work. They have the support to grow... and I think that's important.

FP: Where do you see Winnipeg's public art scene heading in the next five, 10 years? Is it going to be like a Toronto or Montreal?

Nereo: Winnipeg's going to be Winnipeg. But I would like to see just a growing community of budding artists who create beautiful work. And let Winnipeg have its own identity that's just as valuable or prominent as Toronto or Montreal. But let us be known for our diversity in our own way.

FP: What's next for you both?

Padua: I'm working hard on online things (find John Deo Padua Art on Facebook). I'm focusing on social media and starting a YouTube channel. I'm starting to take (art) very seriously.

Nereo: The next venture for me is exploring the relationship between art and therapy. Working more in that sector and branching out. Not just making art for myself, but seeing how art can benefit (others)... just really exploring how art can alleviate stress and act as medicine. (Find Nereo's art on Instagram @scenereo).

Synonym Art Consultation and Wall-to-Wall will be hosting live painting sites at the Sherbrook Street Festival today from noon to 6 p.m.

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John Padua (left) and Nereo II with their first mural in the underpass at The Forks.