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FEATURED

## Salida artist brings big ‘force, energy, color’

by Terri Fleming Special to The Mail  
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The original painting for the “Hike at Upper Cataract Lake” mural – representing summer – was inspired by a photograph by painter Leslie Jorgensen’s friend Noah Wetzel. Jorgensen replaced the photograph’s original male hiker with a woman so her murals would represent men and women equally.

Photo by Terri Fleming

Leslie Jorgensen’s vibrant, pulsating painting style was born, in real terms, on the side of a mountain. The Salida artist began to see the landscape anew in 2017 on a backcountry ski trip at an 11,650-foot-high 10th Mountain Division hut near Leadville.

“And, wow, it was such a different experience. You respect the immensity,” she said. “All I could think about was how I felt and the need to express that in my work.”

At that point, Jorgensen had more than two decades' experience as an artist and graphic designer. Before the hut trip, she was "toying with abstract art, experimenting with color combinations." After, her art became more gestural – which she said "balances representing the landscape with giving it a more emotional, kinetic feeling." She does that with bold brushstrokes and vibrant color expression.



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"The story I'm telling is force, energy and color," she said. "I feel that's the pulse that's different in my landscapes."

Jorgensen's work caught the eye of art consultant Jennifer Perlow, owner of PS Art Consulting in Denver. Perlow assisted Denver art consultant Liz Graham to find the right artist for an indoor murals project at the new Vectra Bank Corporate Center at I-25 and Bellevue Station in the Denver Tech Center.

Perlow and Graham first contacted Jorgensen in the middle of January 2022. Jorgensen's proposal was selected and mock-ups were approved by the Vectra Bank Art Committee by April. After waiting for the building to be completed – and thus getting final dimensions of the spaces she'd be filling – Jorgensen delivered her four paintings on Oct. 31.

Jorgensen said, "They wanted something that represented the four seasons in Colorado. It came to me: winter, skiing; spring, whitewater; summer, hiking; and fall, mountain biking."

Jorgensen called on both her painting and graphic designer skills to envision and execute the murals project. The murals were planned for the hallways of the conference center – facing floor-to-ceiling windows but in a 5-foot-wide hallway.

When figuring out how best to use that long, narrow corridor, Jorgensen decided to use topographic backdrops behind the murals to guide the viewer along the visual path.

Her four paintings were done in comparatively normal sizes, and then technology took over. First the paintings were scanned in and digitized. A second process printed enlarged latex sections that, like wallpaper, were applied to the walls. All finished murals are 7 feet high; widths range from 30 feet to 16 feet. The sections were installed in November, and the finished building opened on Jan. 9.

"I know it was the first time Leslie had done anything of this ilk (murals), but she did an amazing job," Perlow said. "The end result is really stunning. It's everything we hoped for and more."

When Perlow and Jorgensen saw the installed murals for the first time, Perlow said even Jorgensen was blown away. "They are very impressive," Perlow said.

Jorgensen's murals were created from four original paintings, which are:

Winter: "Silverton Skier" was inspired by Jorgensen's own adventures at Silverton Mountain backcountry ski area in the San Juan Mountains near Durango. The original is 8 feet wide by 4 feet tall, the largest in the series.

Spring: "Whitewater" captures kayaking on the Arkansas River near Salida. The original painting is 40 inches wide and 30 inches tall.

Summer: "Hike at Upper Cataract Lake" was inspired by a photograph by Noah Wetzel of Steamboat Springs capturing the trail in the Eagle's Nest Wilderness Area near Silverthorne. The original is 60 inches wide by 30 inches tall. As of Jan. 23, the original painting was front and center in Jorgensen's Salida studio window.

Fall: "Autumn Mountain Bike" also uses a photo by Wetzel inspiration. The painting is based on his shot of Emerald Mountain in Steamboat Springs. The original is 48 inches wide by 24 inches tall.

Jorgensen's road to achievement started in Florida. She grew up in Merritt Island, Florida, and earned a bachelor's degree in graphic design from University of Central Florida. She moved west in 1989 when hired by the Denver Post as a journalist graphic artist. After the Post, she worked in corporate art direction and graphic design, at one point running her own graphic design firm in Denver.

All the while, Jorgensen was “always an artist-artist,” she said, creating and learning. She enrolled in the painting curriculum at Metro State University and took drop-in classes at the Art Students League of Denver.

She also was finding great joy in the Colorado outdoors, hiking, biking and especially skiing. She skied a ton; she taught adaptive skiing at Winter Park and was on the Copper Mountain Volunteer Safety Patrol.

There was a period when Jorgensen was working halftime as a graphic artist and halftime creating paintings in her Denver studio. Her transition to full-time artist was accelerated when she participated in a group show at a downtown Denver gallery.

“I put my work up on a wall, and I was hooked,” she said. “I decided to do whatever it takes to make it (fulltime artist) happen. I lived simply. I spent real time in finding my own artistic voice. I got a lot of time to invent.”

During that time, Jorgensen met her now-husband Ron Salerno, a third-generation Salidan living in the Denver area. The couple would frequently visit Salida and enjoyed the hiking and biking and – especially – the thriving artist community. When Salerno’s IT job transitioned to remote work and Jorgensen grew tired of the commute from their home in the Boulder area to RiNO (River North Art District) in downtown Denver, they decided to move to the mountains.

“We looked at other mountain communities, but we liked Salida’s location best,” Jorgensen said. Not too far from the commercial hub of Denver, and not too close. They moved to Salida in 2018.

In 2019, Jorgensen opened her downtown Salida gallery and jumped into the local art community with both feet. She’s a board member of the Salida Council for the Arts, a member of the Salida Creative District (which she’s proud to point out was the first designated in the state) and has chaired Salida ArtWalk.

She loves her gallery space. She enjoys interacting with walk-in visitors – loves to hear what they say about her work and learns from their questions.

What’s coming up for Jorgensen? She’s been getting calls from people interested in murals and has several irons in the fire. One fun project she’s looking forward to is creating artwork for Denver-based Phunkshun Wear’s 2023-2024 line of neck gaiters and ski goggle covers. She was told her creations will be sold at Monarch Mountain’s shop.

Of Jorgensen's four original paintings done for the murals project, two, "Whitewater" and "Silverton Skier," are sold. "Autumn Mountain Bike" and "Hike at Upper Cataract Lake" are available. Limited-edition prints of the four are available for sale at [lesliejorgensen.com](http://lesliejorgensen.com). Additional information is available on that website as well. Jorgensen's gallery is at 120 W. First St. in downtown Salida.



Salida photographer's work also graces Denver building