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Madison Public Market murals give a taste of what's to come

Exterior artworks decorate the facility on North First Street

BY [EMILIE HEIDEMANN](#) JANUARY 10, 2026 8:00 AM



TOMMY WASHBUSH

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The Mexican-influenced 'Axolotl & Alma' is a collaboration from Madison artists Issis Macias and Rodrigo Carapia.

A hummingbird and a Mexican salamander, the axolotl, are outlined in black against pastel pinks and blues. A Black woman with an Afro is surrounded by flowers and a rainbow. An Indigenous woman dressed in traditional garments is set against a backdrop of stones and shells. These murals decorate the exterior of the Madison Public Market, which is expected to open this spring.

Madison has a list of artists who can be tapped when a public project needs art, says Karin Wolf, city of Madison arts program administrator. Wolf's office acted as a liaison between the artists and the market; funding came from private sources.

Community response has been "overwhelmingly positive," says Wolf, though a few felt the city was pushing a "diversity agenda" and others have wondered what the murals have to do with food.

All the murals celebrate immigrant groups that have brought so much to the Madison region, including food, says Wolf, calling them an "appetizer" to get people excited about the market and Madison's food history. More works of art are expected as the market nears opening.

Axolotl & Alma

Axolotl & Alma is a collaboration between Madison artists Issis Macias and Rodrigo Carapia, and is an homage to their Mexican heritage.

Their visions blend seamlessly, Macias says, even though she and Carapia work separately and without communicating in

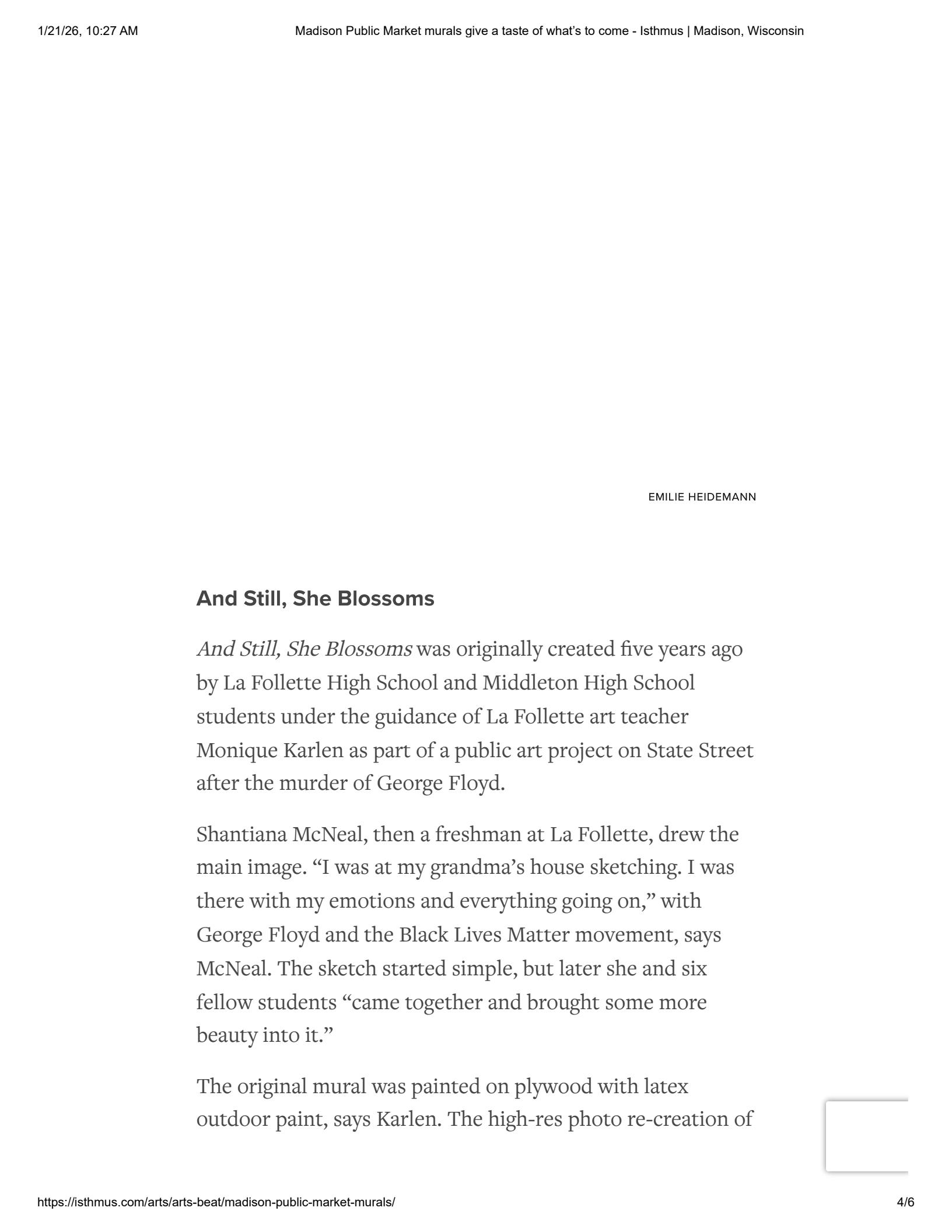
advance about the images. Macias designed the mural's background and Carapia the intricate representations of the hummingbird and axolotl.

Alma means “soul” in Spanish, Macias says. In Mexican culture the hummingbird represents “the souls of loved ones that pass.”

“When a hummingbird gets close to you during the Day of the Dead, that means a family member is visiting you,” Carapia adds. On the mural’s right, an axolotl appears to swim through a circular design. Circles are important symbols in Aztec culture, says Carapia, representing the divine and cosmic order.

The two artists started collaborating in May 2022, says Macias, a self-taught artist who usually works with oil pastels and acrylics. She is the daughter of Mexican immigrants. Carapia, also self-taught, is originally from Mexico City. His public art can be seen around the state.

The message, says Carapia, is that “Latin and Mexican artists are here. We are here to stay and we are not going anywhere.”

EMILIE HEIDEMANN

And Still, She Blossoms

And Still, She Blossoms was originally created five years ago by La Follette High School and Middleton High School students under the guidance of La Follette art teacher Monique Karlen as part of a public art project on State Street after the murder of George Floyd.

Shantiana McNeal, then a freshman at La Follette, drew the main image. “I was at my grandma’s house sketching. I was there with my emotions and everything going on,” with George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, says McNeal. The sketch started simple, but later she and six fellow students “came together and brought some more beauty into it.”

The original mural was painted on plywood with latex outdoor paint, says Karlen. The high-res photo re-creation of

the design for the market is vinyl on aluminum and even includes the wood grain and screw holes of the original.

Elizah Leonard

Elizah Leonard is an ode to Madison's Ho-Chunk culture, says the artist, UW-Madison photography professor Tom Jones. Jones is a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation and has been an artist since he was a teen. His work is held in various national collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian Institution.



TOMMY WASHRUISH

His piece stems from a childhood memory. When he was in third grade, he went with his mother to a healing ceremony led by a Sioux tribe medicine man. "We sat on the floor along the walls with many other people. When the lights were turned off the women started to sing," he writes in his artist statement. "They were asking for the spirits to come in. It was at this time that small orbs of light began to float around the room."

Jones tells *Isthmus* he set up a portable studio at the Memorial Day Pow Wow in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, where he took portraits of community members. He captured Leonard

wearing a traditional shawl, beaded necklace and earrings, all made by Leonard's family members. Jones added beads and shells to his print and then rephotographed it. For the exterior of the market it is reproduced, like the other two works, as a vinyl on aluminum panel.

Jones, who's lived in the city for more than 45 years, says it's "an honor to be recognized and to share a representation on our Ho-Chunk land here in Madison."

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