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Baltimore artist Michael Owen funnels Willy Street's inclusive spirit into a mural for Plan B

by

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Willy Street is getting a lot more love-ly this week. Baltimore artist Michael Owen is in town to create one of two new murals for Plan B, the LGBT nightclub on the 900 block. The work will consist of the word "love" spelled out in bold, graphic sign language on one side of the building.

Best known as founder of the Baltimore Love Project, Owen has created 20 similar murals throughout Baltimore. Now he's placing them in cities around the country. He'll paint an exterior wall of Plan B through July 11. His Madison visit also includes a public talk at La Fête de Marquette in Central Park on July 10 and a dedication ceremony on July 12.

Karin Wolf, the city's arts program administrator, brought Owen to the attention of Plan B's owners.

"I'd seen Michael in Baltimore when I was doing visits to studio artist spaces," she explains, noting that he seemed like the right fit for a public art project in Madison.

Wolf says the new work is part of the Marquette neighborhood's art plan, which includes additional murals for public and private spaces on other parts of Willy Street.

"They are trying to attract international, national and local artists so there will be a great mix of mural art there," she says.

According to Owen's website, the mural design "expresses love by connecting people and communities."

Plan B co-owner Corey Gresen finds the design uniquely related to the issue of gay marriage.

"It seemed poignant, and the timing was amazing," he says. "We picked [the design] because it said, 'We're a gay bar, and we're fighting for equal rights, and love will always win.' I feel we'll look back 20 years from now and remember what happened this summer."

Gresen is of course referring to U.S. District Judge Barbara Crabb's June 6 decision to strike down Wisconsin's same-sex marriage ban allowing gay couples to marry legally throughout the state.

Artist Sharon Kilfoy, director of the Williamson Street Art Center, agrees that the work will read as a powerful symbol of marriage equality. Kilfoy has helped bring murals to Madison for more than 25 years. She was instrumental in getting Owen's mural approved by the Marquette Landmarks Commission, necessary because the neighborhood is considered historic.

"There's a great quote by Che Guevara that says, 'The true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love,'" Kilfoy says. "Artists do public art to improve lives and beautify neighborhoods, but no one talks about the fact that deep down, the inspiration is love.... I hope it's not something that will make only the Marquette neighborhood happy, but anyone who comes to visit."

Wolf says that though Owen's love murals began in Baltimore, they reflect something that Madison residents value greatly.

"The mural is symbolic of inclusivity and bringing people together," she says. "And that's what Willy Street is all about."