

The New York Times

Copyright © 2007 The New York Times

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, JUNE 17, 2007

\$5 beyond the great

WOODY HOCHSWENDER

A Mural That Redefines the Word 'Big'

WINSTED

IN the category of the odd, ambitious and artistically brazen, the mural that Ellen Griesedieck has been working on for eight years in a barn on a quiet country road in the northwest corner of Connecticut is probably in a class by itself.

A monumental artwork that, when finished, will be 48 feet high and 120 feet wide, the Wall of America, as it is called, is a three-dimensional painting depicting in heroic terms the world of work in America, from steelworkers to surgeons to miners to assembly-line workers to farmers to mechanics.

In short, a work of art about the art of work — welding, wiring, milking, lifting, sledge-hammering work — a paean to knuckle-bruising, back-breaking, all-consuming, when-will-it-ever-be-done labor. You can work up a sweat just looking at it.

Bridge workers balance on I-beams; Boeing mechanics straddle enormous jet engines; linesmen repair power lines; astronauts blast off into space — all in three dimensions, somewhat in the manner of a Red Grooms painting, not confined to canvas but projecting outward off the wall. At various intervals, the mural is 12 to 16 feet deep. Eventually, children will be able to wander between its pieces, no doubt in awe and wonder.

The barn studio in which the artist works is not nearly large enough for the painting, which is created on aluminum panels. A scale model of the entire project adorns one wall. The full-size mural will be five stories high.

"Large enough to fill the Parthenon," as Ms. Griesedieck put it.

It is probably fitting that a piece celebrating hard work should itself be a prodigious feat of labor. Ms. Griesedieck is 59; the mural has consumed her for more than seven years, and she estimates it will require seven to eight more years to complete. A slim, blond, energetic

woman — at 5-foot-2, she is dwarfed by the figures in her mural — Ms. Griesedieck exudes a kind of muscular intensity that seems almost mystically adapted to the daunting task she has undertaken.

She has had help, of course — lots of it. Artisans around the country have donated time and materials, and teams of schoolchildren have fabricated sections of the mural.

To make a blown-glass section representing fire, two classes of West Virginia fifth-graders blew glass at the Blenko Glass Company.



M. J. Fiedler for The New York Times

To create a giant axe, 40 children in Ashland, Wis., worked with recycled submerged wood from Lake Superior. A group of children in New Mexico made the ceramic tiles that will form the pattern in a worker's red plaid shirt.

In all, Ms. Griesedieck estimated, 15,000 people have contributed in one way or another to the mural.

Her project has been supported by the actor Paul Newman, a family friend. Ms. Griesedieck's husband, Sam Posey, an architect and race-car driver, became friends with Mr. Newman, who shares his passion for racing. Ms. Griesedieck drew the original illustrations for the labels on Newman's Own salad dressings.

"Whenever I think of something crazy, he's

one of those people who don't think it's crazy," she said of Mr. Newman. The mural is partly underwritten by a \$200,000 grant from the Newman's Own Foundation.

Ms. Griesedieck respects the idea of hard physical labor, even worships it. She calls the empty, rusting factories that blot many of Connecticut's cities "our cathedrals." It is appropriate, then, that her completed artwork is to be housed in a pair of buildings from an old sock factory in Winsted, a once-vibrant New England manufacturing town in the northwest corner of the state, near the Massachusetts border, whose main street is now lined with empty red-brick mills and factories.

"The potential is great for Winsted to become a destination town," she said.

The Winsted building renovation project, which her husband is overseeing, has been aided by the brownfields program of the Environmental Protection Agency, which provides financial assistance to redevelop areas where reuse may be complicated by the existence of hazardous substances. In this case, the 2.2-acre site of the former Whiting Hosiery Company was contaminated with volatile organic compounds, according to the E.P.A. The brownfields program awarded the Wall of America project \$200,000 for the cleanup.

Her husband's design calls for one of the red-brick buildings to have its roof raised to accommodate the outsized artwork. The other building will be connected by a walkway and serve as a visitor center. Ms. Griesedieck envisions school buses from as far away as New York City bringing young people on class trips to view and explore her mural.

Ms. Griesedieck, who lives in Sharon, a few houses down from the artist Jasper Johns, majored in art at the University of Colorado, where, she says, "everything I did was really big." She sometimes refers to her ambitious mural as a "folly."

Her mural may be a kind of folly, but the artist is a real piece of work.

E-mail: conn@nytimes.com.