

15 MINUTES

Jaime Quintero's search for blank walls, and a home for an American masterpiece

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Jaime Quintero stood in his sweatpants and yellow IZOD polo last Friday, painting an underwater scene featuring regional wildlife, on the outside wall of the bathrooms at Lee County's Manatee Park on Palm Beach Boulevard.

"I refuse to stay home watching TV," said the 67-year-old muralist and illustrator. "I eat my soup every day and I feel young, I feel strong, I feel healthy. Let me go out and paint."

In the 1960s and 70s, Quintero worked for National Geographic, where he produced hand-painted maps illustrating landscapes like the ocean floor, the moon, the planets and the Rocky Mountains. Now the Colombia native works part-time as a park ranger in Naples, and takes pleasure in creating murals and illustrations with his old-time ways, for a wide variety of institutions and wall spaces—places like the Navy lab, the U.S. Department of Commerce, the Geographic and Census Bureau of Mexico and Georgetown University.

"You can see I have my paints and brushes instead of a nice Dell Computer," he said. "We're using art, not a computer. I have nothing against computers, but it's nothing like getting the paint on your hands."

"I invite children to look back a little bit, to stop in this frenetic, fast way of electronics. Give me five minutes and I'll show you, you can also paint this."

Lee County Parks and Recreation is allowing Quintero to paint on this wall partially as an educational tool for fifth-graders. This year, 2,900 of them will make it a stop

on their "Manatee Habits and Habits" field trip this year, said Manatee Park senior program specialist Nancy Kilmartin.

"We are depicting the habitat accurately," she said. "He's doing a great job. People should stop by and look at it. The artist in progress, you know?"

As Quintero painted on, adding some blue to his ocean, prisoners from the Lee County Jail cleaned the bathrooms. Elsewhere, a group of schoolchildren appeared briefly in a clearing on a trail, one of them spotting a lizard.

"Just give me a wall, without rules and regulations, and I will make a piece of beauty," he said, stepping back from the wall, brown eyes squinting into the sun. "Let me use the walls to let me paint art for education. No graffiti. No cartoons. No commercials. Let's be serious about art."

"Actually, graffiti, spraying with a can, is a good sign believe it or not. It's healthy, because they're trying to express something from the heart. All they need is a little guidance, that's all they need."

He adds a touch of brown to an eagle cruising above the surface of his ocean.

"Maybe 40 or 50 years later people will find this," he said. "They'll say, 'Who painted these?' I paint the ospreys and the fish and the eagles. It's exactly the same way I paint



Jaime Quintero

PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

for the magazine; the same quality, the same passion."

Quintero said his murals have appeared in Colombia, Ecuador and the United States, but his masterpiece is an enormous, three-dimensional map, really a sculpture, of the United States. It is as big as a professional basketball court, and made out of plaster. It is in storage in the Map Building, at Babson College in Boston, in 1,400 separate blocks, each one 17 by 24 inches.

"Every single hill in this country," he said. "Every road, every river, every mountain."

Quintero has a special offer for the Fort Myers — he would like to donate the map to the city's Public Arts Department. He said he can be reached at 324-7587.

"It's a map without a home," he said. "No one wants to deal with it (because it's so big). This is a way to say thank you to this

country, as an immigrant, and that is the way I'd like to say it. With this map. I only need someone in a high position to say, 'OK Jaime, we have the place, now bring us the map.'"

If the city accepts his offer, Quintero said he would rent a truck, and bring the map back from Massachusetts himself.

He currently lives in Naples with his wife Ruth, and son David, a high school student. He also has a daughter, Lilianna, who is an exchange student in Germany. A map/mural of the Everglades is foremost in his future plans.

"If they would give me a building with a wall 20 stories high, I would paint it there," he said. ■

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