

Fourth Time IS THE Charm

Returning to a high tower to apply old tricks to a new dog

BY LARRY POLZIN

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I HAVE BEEN FORTUNATE throughout my career in this crazy world of signs to have met and worked with a lot of wonderful people. Some were my mentors, some were fellow artists and many were and still are clients and customers. I typically try to establish a long-term relationship with my clients, and it's always nice when they remember you and make a point to call you back. And one of those long-term relationships spanned 25 years—the painting of the Denver Nestle Purina Tower.

It had been nine years since I last hung off the side of the tower, and time had taken its toll. The last painting of the dogs was done in 2006 with my business partner and good friend Rick Folker. We had painted two different dogs on the east and west tower elevations as part of Purina's "Long Live Your Dog / Long Live Your Puppy" campaign. But the combination of mile high sunshine and pollution from the nearby highway had left the paintings faded and degraded, and they were long overdue for a facelift.

I received an email from Evvie Moravec of the Denver Purina branch, asking me if I was still in business, and did I want to paint the dogs again. My answer was a very enthusiastic, "Yes," and "Yes," and so I headed down to Denver Dog Chow HQ.

I met with Evvie and Damian Cordova, who would be heading up the new advertising campaign. We reviewed the preliminary artwork submittals, made a few revisions and sent it back to St. Louis for some re-tweaking. Within a week I was holding the new artwork in my hand, and I was totally blown away—this time was going to be different, and I could hardly wait to get started.

I knew I would need some high-quality help, so I called my daughters Sarah and Jessica to see who was available. The girls live on the East and West coast and both jumped at the chance to paint the tower with Dear ol' Dad. The first time I painted it they were still in elementary school and bragged to their friends that their daddy painted the biggest dog in Denver. This would be the fourth time I'd be up on the wall, and in the end it was Jessie who got a month's leave of absence to come work with me.

The project started with the artwork, and I had the privilege to work with a very talented



Like an iceberg on the horizon, the freshly painted Nestle Purina building.



Welcome to the wonderful world of color mixing.

gentleman named Justin Ford. Justin and his team were based out of St. Louis and were responsible for initializing, producing and delivering the final artwork. The marketing department wanted the new paintings to have a photo-realistic look, and since I am not a "fine artist," it would need to be broken down into a very detailed posterization. Justin would be providing me the posterized artwork, so we had the discussion of color vs. detail. Since the tower is 11 stories tall and the paintings would be viewed from either the highway (at 60 mph) or from the ground, I suggested we keep the color palette to around 15 colors. I was overruled, however, and both graphics ended up with about 22 colors each. This would give the paintings more depth and detail, and the opportunity to sharpen my color mixing skills with 44 custom colors was a real bonus.

With the contract signed and the artwork in progress, the next step was to secure the sign permit. Typically, when applying for a permit and estimating the square footage of a sign, the city draws a box around the copy or graphic and whatever is inside the box is considered the "sign." We knew we were allowed 200 square feet per side from the previous paintings, but since the graphic and copy would hardly fit in a box, I presented an alternative. With the help of Damian (who is a master draftsman) I submit-



Dog Chow artwork with our handy swing stage color guide.



Electro pounce in action with some of the mind-numbing pattern details.



Daughter Jessica concentrating intently.



The old man, showing her how it's done.



Keepin' the lines tight on a severely textured surface.

ted a scale layout of the graphic with a grid system covering the entire layout. The grid was composed of boxes, each representing one square foot. When all the boxes were counted they totaled 200 boxes, which represented the 200 square feet we were allowed. The city graciously signed off on it, another hurdle had been cleared and now we could officially get started.

Justin put together the new artwork and went above and beyond the call of duty. He sent me large color outputs of the graphics which I would use for color reference. He sent full color printouts of each color which I would match my paint to, and a breakdown of each section by color. This would become a helpful guide once we began painting, as working up close to a large painting you tend to lose all sense of proportion. The tower also called for a 10' checkerboard logo painted on the north and south elevations. Since the checkerboard was PMS 485 bright red and reds have a tendency to fade, I decided to use a high quality acrylic paint. I talked to the good folks at Lucas paint, my Benjamin Moore supplier and they recommended the Aura paint product. This was Benny Moore's top of the line acrylic paint and came with a guarantee against color fade. I thought this would be a great experiment of acrylic vs. enamel, as the formulation of lettering enamels and their consequent longevity has changed with new

formulations and EPA guidelines, and once they took the lead out...

The next step was producing the patterns. In times past I painted the same image on both sides of the tower and was able to use my pattern twice. This time it would be two different images, a dog on the west side and—for the first time—a cat representing Purina Cat Chow on the east side. This meant two separate patterns, and they had to be spot on; there was little room for error once we got on the wall. I talked to my 'ol buddy Vic Vickers at Finline Graphics, and he and his talented production crew got 'er done. We scaled the artwork to actual size and before long I had 16 rolls of 48" paper with pen-plotted artwork. This sure beat the old days of projecting everything by hand, but I still got a taste of it with the checkerboard logo - it was a simple 10' layout so I drew it off measurements, by hand, in-shop, on the floor, on my knees.

Once the line art was transferred to paper, the next step was to perforate the patterns. This step requires the use of an old school tool called a pounce machine. The pounce machine is basically an electric transformer with a drawing "pen," which is used to trace the pen-plotted layout. An electrical charge is sent through the tip of the pen, and as you trace each letter a tiny hole is burned through the paper. The voltage is regulated so as not to set the paper

on fire, but the operation of the pounce machine takes a good eye and a steady hand so as to not perform an amperage check on oneself. Many a skilled craftsman has lit themselves up by "pouncing" the end of their finger—ouch!

This seemed like a perfect job for my wife Donna, who has a fresher brain and much better manual dexterity than myself, and she graciously accepted the position. While Donna was busy successfully not electrocuting herself, I made a couple of juicy new pounce bags with black charcoal powder. Once the patterns were in place, the pounce bags would be rubbed over the perforated layout and the black powder would transfer the image onto the surface of the wall and become our guideline for the paint.

I began the task of mixing colors. Justin had sent me color outputs of each color, which I overlaid with clear acetate to create my color mixing boards. I would mix a color, brush it on the acetate and let it dry, and then check to see if my color was an accurate match. This was a very important step since the colors were all quite close in contrast, and 44 soup cans of color later I was ready to start painting.

I picked Jessie up at the airport and we drove directly to Purina for Jessica's safety class and the inspection of the swing stage. The swing stage had been rigged by Spider, which specializes in high exposure aerial riggings, so we knew we were in good hands. After a

quick lesson on how to ride the “man lift,” we were on our way to the tower roof. When we climbed out the hatch on the rooftop we realized how high 11 stories really is. I’ve painted big walls before and it does take some getting used to—the height, the exposure, the gentle swinging in the wind and that pesky sense of being off balance—everything keeps you very uncomfortable. As a father I was very concerned about my daughter’s safety, but before long Jessica was at home in her harness, tied to her safety line and driving the swing stage like she’d been born to do so—I guess maybe she had been.

We decide to start on the south elevation and painted one of the 10’ x 10’ checkerboard logos. The weather was beautiful and before long we had the pattern on, pounced and were cutting in the lines. The texture of the building went from smooth to unbelievably rough, but we kept our lines clean and rolled the larger areas. The Aura acrylic paint covered beautifully, but because it was red and red has a tendency to fade, we decide to come back the following day and give it two more coats of paint. The plan behind the plan here was to get Jessica comfortable with the whole swing stage process, because from here on out it was going to get a lot more intense.

The next day the guy from Spider was out to move the swing stage to the west elevation. We had to paint all four sides of the tower, so there would be four moves and everything needed to be coordinated and our schedules had to mesh. David McComb was our main man at Spider and he and his crew kept everything moving like clockwork.

The stage was moved to the west side and we showed up early and optimistic. All the previous graphics had been painted in late fall or early spring and the hardest part of the job was trying to stay warm. Now it was summertime and it was hot, so we had to adjust our schedule with that of the sun. We began by finding the center of the building and plumbing a vertical center line. Damian and I had gone over all the measurements, so I knew exactly where the first pattern needed to be. We unrolled it, leveled it and taped it to the wall with a ton of duct tape—losing a paper pattern 11 stories up was not an option. After we pounced the layout we re-rolled our pattern and sprayed the charcoal lines with spray fixative just in case of inclement weather. The next pattern was justified to the center and to the pattern above it and pretty soon we had all eight rolls pounced on the wall.

We broke out the paint and brushes and started painting, keeping a close

eye on the weather. Afternoon thunderstorms are the norm for Colorado in the summer time, and when we finally decided to check the sky on the other side of the building it was pitch black except for the flashes of lightning. We exited the stage in a controlled panic and got safely down just before the storm hit. “All part of the adventure,” I said to Jess as we walked back to the truck in the pouring rain.

The next day started out beautifully, and we nailed the copy and started on the dog’s head. I was a bit nervous, wondering if my paint colors were mixed close enough to make the posterization work. If they didn’t work, trying to fix it would be a nightmare, but by the end of the week I was on the phone with Spider arranging the next move. The dog looked great and everyone loved it.

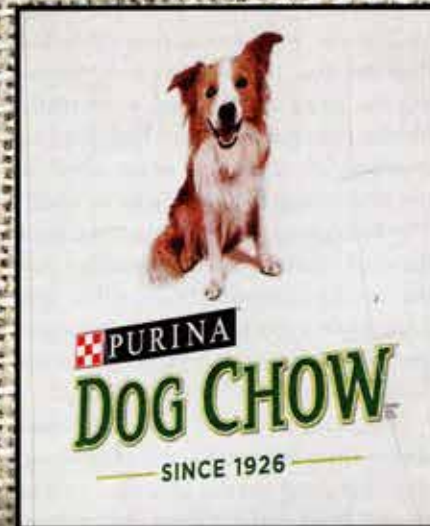
The east side of the tower had some challenges—there were several obstructions on the building, which prevented us from landing on the roof, so a scaffold had to be erected. Waco Scaffolding came out and built a scaffold of monumental proportions. It took the riggers two days to build our landing pad, but soon we were up in the air with our paint and patterns, roasting in the hot summer sun. This side got the early morning sunshine, and once the tower got hot there was no working as we were totally



First elevation complete! Now comes the fun stuff...



Once we saw the posterization was working we were as happy as this lil’ guy!



Doggie side done!



Taping down the tail section of the big Kitty pattern.



The charcoal inhalation step – Jessie pouncing the pattern on the wall.



Worms' eye view of the cat wall.



Putting things in perspective.



The "white knuckler" – the long road to the top of the tower.



As Jessie fills in the last spot of color, the Purina project is complete.

exposed. So we adjusted our schedule to arrive early, work until it got too hot, and then come back when it was shady and work until dark. It was a tough schedule to follow but our spirits were high and we were really enjoying the project, and each other's company.

The cat graphic was more detailed than the dog, but soon we were painting the paws and tail and were ready for the final move. Spider had done an excellent job of keeping us on schedule but everything abruptly came to a halt. The swing stage couldn't be moved until the scaffold tower was disassembled, and our one day turnaround turned into four days. After a few phone calls and some last minute flight rearrangements we were ready for the "white knuckler."

The north elevation of the tower had always been the final exam—the swing stage was set up on the train shed roof at ground level, and it was an eleven story ride up the face of the building to the

top of the tower. To say there was a lot of exposure is an understatement, and I kept smiling at Jess and giving her the thumbs up while praying for calm weather and no problems. It took about 10 minutes for the ride up, and it's time like these when you contemplate your own mortality, especially when the most precious thing you love is on the swing stage next to you. But our rig was secure and our safety lines and equipment was the best. We reached the top, pounced our pattern, painted the logo, gave it two more coats, and called it a day. The tower was done, everything had gone amazingly well and we loaded our gear into the truck.

We had become quite popular with the work crew and got a lot of compliments on the paintings—my daughter Jessica getting most of them for some reason. The good folks at Purina were happy, and I tried to convince them to go to a "bi-annual" advertisement campaign, just to keep things fresh. I didn't

get a commitment yet, but I know where they hang out and I'm not above pestering them.

This job and all the previous paintings of the tower have been the highlight of my sign painting career. I wear the title "The Purina Guy" with pride and hope they will call me again. The project was done "old school" with a lot of "new school" techniques, and I am proud to have been a part of it, and working with my daughter was a real treat. I told Jessica I don't know how many more years I'll be doing this (several more I hope), and it may be time to pass along the paintbrush and the skills and knowledge of how the big walls used to be done.

There's not a lot of us wall dogs left, and someone's got to train the new pups—maybe that's my place in this crazy world of signs now—give back what was freely given to me, and what a privilege and honor to be able to do so. **SDG**