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Mural artists Mandy van Leeuwen, left, and Michel Saint Hilaire bring the lush look of the rainforest to the walls of the zoo's Tropical House.

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BY BRENDA SUDERMAN

CONCRETE JUNGLE

Murals transform the zoo's Tropical House into an exotic environment

In the midst of the dense rainforest, the brilliant red of a tropical flower peeks through a tangle of muted green and blue.

But a closer look at this lush jungle reveals some details not found in nature. A hose reel has been painted blue to blend in, and a door is disguised with trees and vines.

That's because this rainforest is two-dimensional, painted on the rough stucco walls of the Tropical House at the heart of Assiniboine Park Zoo.

"We've given a new meaning to 'concrete jungle,'" laughs mural artist Mandy van Leeuwen. This is the second winter that van Leeuwen, aided by artist Michel Saint Hilaire, has spent transforming the drab brown and grey interior of this 9,000-square-foot domed building.

Meant to be viewed from the screen of plants and trees on the upper level of the aviary, the rainforest mural extends halfway around this circular building, setting a tropical tone while achieving the practical effect of disguising heating and cooling duct work.

On the ground level, a scene from the African savannah gives context to a pair of Rueppel's vultures who make their home in the Tropical House. A lone tree spreads its branches to the sky, while a full-maned lion walks through the tall golden grass, intent on his surroundings.

Next to the vultures, the zoo's flamingos stand on spindly legs in front of a scene of a Caribbean saltwater lagoon. A closer inspection reveals that the flock has been augmented by six, owing to the talents of van Leeuwen and Saint Hilaire, who have portrayed them amidst their breeding nests in the mud. Even the real birds were fooled by the illusion, says van Leeuwen, who saw them challenging their painted counterparts.

"It looks more realistic in here, happier, brighter, more colourful," she says of the effect created for the flamingos.

The realism continues in the next enclosure, home to two African dwarf crocodiles. They lazily hugged the scaffolding while van Leeuwen painted massive tree roots, big leafy green

plants, and vines along the edge of a pool. She also depicted a rock formation on the concrete platform in the middle of the pool, to simulate their natural habitat.

Only one small wall in the tropical house still retains its original rough brown stucco finish from its 1972 construction. The artists will cover it with primer and sealant before beginning their next mural, using exterior semi-gloss paint as usual.

"They have babies every time we're ready to start, so we can't disturb them," says van Leeuwen, 26, of the obstacles the two painters have faced in adding a waterfall and red cliffs to the enclosure housing the Crested Screemers and Southern Lapwing birds.

The pair also plans to transform the arches leading to the reptile tunnel into an ancient Mayan temple, complete with plaster-relief tribal figures and skulls. The hospital green of the animal enclosures inside the tunnel will be replaced with painted habitats, a change that will be appealing both to the animals and to visitors, says zoo curator Bob Wrigley.

"When people visit a site like this, we're trying to recreate an environment," says Wrigley of the murals, which cost about \$5,000 each, funds allocated from the zoo's improvement budget.

"Very few people can get to South America and walk through the Mayan jungle. That's the atmosphere we want to recreate — the heat, humidity and animals."

The moist indoor climate and the creatures that thrive in it presented a few challenges for the mural artists, more accustomed to a human audience interested in their summer work on building exteriors.

The big-beaked African Hornbills kept stealing their ropes, the flamingos followed their every move with interest, and the dive-bombing habits of some of the tropical birds prompted the pair to cover their heads with hats or bandanas.

Despite the animal antics, rough canvas and slow-drying paint, the pair are eager to use their skills in creating animal habitats at the Assiniboine Park Zoo and any other zoo that might come calling.

"It's just an extension of everything else," Saint Hilaire, 33, says of the changes the murals have made in the Tropical House. "It looks like it is supposed to be here."

"It needed a facelift," adds van Leeuwen. "It's kind of nice to be part of that."