

Testimony to a Changing Landscape

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Martin Kolter had a front-row seat to Nationals Park before the chairs were even put in place.

Kolter has painted the landscape of the South Capitol neighborhood that is home to the new stadium since he moved from Newark, N.J., to Washington, D.C, in 1978. So when the city began stadium construction, Kolter stuck by his muse.

“I felt very comfortable there,” Kolter said, adding that the landscape reminded him of Newark. “I felt that I could visually make a dialogue of what I was seeing.”

Kolter, who works at the Smithsonian’s American Art Museum, began painting the construction of the Nationals stadium in August 2006. Almost two years and a ballpark later, Kolter is the visionary behind 25 paintings that depict the evolution of the construction.

The Carroll Square Gallery included five of Kolter’s pieces in its latest exhibit, “Great American Pastime.” The exhibit also features other paintings, photographs and sculptures related to baseball and will remain open through May 30.

Kolter was drawn to the neighborhood almost 30 years ago when he first discovered the South Capitol Street Bridge — a structure that was revitalized around the same time the ballpark was being constructed. Kolter said he used to love standing underneath the pillars of the bridge.

One of the five paintings on display at Carroll Square is titled “Farewell South Capitol” and is one of Kolter’s last tributes to the neighborhood before construction began. The painting shows what the South Capitol Bridge used to look like.

“You’re looking at this drab, green steel work and it becomes magical, at least for me,” he said.

Other paintings include “Setting the Castings,” “The First Pitch” and an untitled work piece — all of which depict the construction site with cranes, metal rods and contractors in action.

Kolter is among six other artists in the gallery, located in the basement of the Carroll Square building, including Jim Dow, who took panoramic photos of ballparks, and John Dreyfuss, who sculpted baseball players in action.

But when Kolter thinks of his South Capitol paintings, baseball may be the last thing that comes to his mind. “My paintings in many ways have nothing to do with baseball,” he said.

For Kolter, his collection of artwork isn’t so much about an American pastime as it is the aesthetics of one neighborhood. “I didn’t think of the Nationals stadium as a new ballpark. I thought of it as a new landscape,” he said.

Kolter went to the construction site every weekend while the stadium was being built. The construction workers were surprised, yet flattered by the interest of an artist, he said. “They were really quite touched,” Kolter said, recalling conversations with workers who were moved by seeing themselves immortalized in art. “The guys were just really wonderful,” he said.

Though the city’s 2006 announcement to undergo the major initiative provided Kolter with a new palette, he did worry whether the District could handle the financial burden. But now that the stadium is up and running, Kolter said he has become optimistic about the ways in which it can improve the neighborhood.

“I hope it’s going to be a good thing,” he said.

The Carroll Square Gallery is located at 975 F St. NW and is open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

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