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Art in Vegas

Doubling Down on the Creative Milieu

By Lissa Townsend Rodgers

Few cities have as profound a visual identity as Las Vegas. Even people who've never been here can "see" it, from the distinctive skyline, to the street-level neon signs and the cars and dice on the casino tables.

It's also been an inspiration for artists working in every format. Songs, stories, movies — every form of art has, at one time or another, embodied the Sin City image as both elemental inspiration and flamboyant flourish. And it includes the visual arts, from Annie Leibovitz photographing Sammy Davis Jr. in the desert, to the ubiquitous and anonymous "Welcome to Las Vegas" posters in gift shops.

"Our visual history is incredible, even off the Strip — there is literally art everywhere," says Krystal Ramirez, part of a local troop of artists.

Art about Las Vegas may be a known quantity, but what about art in Las Vegas?

"I think that being in Las Vegas definitely inspires my work," says lifelong Las Vegas resident and artist Justin Favela. "I pay attention a lot to the surface. ... That definitely correlates with Las Vegas and its design and its architecture." Neon has had a tremendous impact on local artists, both as a subject and as a medium. Jerry Misko depicts neon signs, while Richard Hooker uses neon tubing to create art. Hooker, artist and former Urban Arts Coordinator for the City's Office of Cultural Affairs notes that he is far from the only one to work in this medium: "Some important works are based on light: like the UNLV Flashlight, the Arts Commissioned works for the Fremont Canopy, the Cultural Corridor Bridge, the 18b paintbrushes and that sweet light work in the Fremont Garage that Mary Warner and Rayann Figler created for the Centennial."

The city's relationship with light goes beyond its synthetic forms. Photographer Ginger Bruner says that in the "East, things like humidity [create] a wonderful automatic filter that makes everything pretty. The light here is so hard ... that you either have to embrace it or learn how to mitigate it."

Las Vegas is a city of characters that invite observation. They can be as outrageous as a jump-suited Elvis impersonator riding a Rascal past a pawnshop billboard, or as subtle as the expression on a woman's face as she checks her watch. We imagine their backstories — Winner? Loser? Wedded? Divorced? Local? Tourist? "I really got inspired by lots of people out there. ... The nomadic quality of people moving in and out," says local artist Joseph Watson. "A lot of Vegas stories have influenced my work directly."

There's also the unique visual texture of our cityscape. "Before I moved here, I made paintings of broken-down neon," says Erin Stellmon. "But once I moved here, I started doing collages. Vegas is sort of a huge collage." After all, what is the Strip but a collision of fairy castles and pyramids, fonts and videos, shapes and colors flung together haphazardly into a harmonious whole?

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The art community reflects the ever-changing nature, not just in what it depicts but how it behaves. “Las Vegas has a short memory of its history including its cultural past,” says Ricahrd Hooker, “It seems change-addicted, intent on looking for the next big thing and ready to topple over obstacles in the way – and that goes for art and culture.” Joseph Watson agrees: “If you ask anybody what the Vegas art scene is, nobody will have the same answer, because it’s constantly evolving. I think it’s the nature of this town too—things get imploded, things get built.”

The small town/big city dichotomy of Vegas is also in practice.

“It’s a smaller art community,” Favela says, “which is great because it’s a tighter-knit art community. Everybody supports each other, goes to each other’s shows and gives each other opportunities. But, then again, it’s a small town. So maybe after a year or two you run out of places to show, and there’s nobody to buy your art. So that is kind of the downside.”

Like the rest of Las Vegas, the arts community took a big hit during the recession. Seven years later, that blow still smarts. Michele Quinn of Michele Quinn Fine Art recalls moving back to Las Vegas in 2003. “We had a strong group of people that I felt were honestly working to bring something better and bigger here. And it was working. Until the market crashed.”

The recession hit personal and business budgets hard. Disposable income for purchasing pieces and donating to arts organizations vanished. And while Vegas has plenty of empty walls and fat wallets, serious collectors often head for Los Angeles or New York to make their purchases. “If they want to buy substantial art, they have a tendency to take themselves elsewhere to buy it,” says Bruner.

But if the arts community is still struggling, the Arts District is thriving, as empty storefronts and auto garages give way to antique shops and cocktail bars. It’s the fate of all boho neighborhoods. New York City’s SoHo has become so pricey that not even the Museum of Modern Art can afford the rent anymore; downtown Los Angeles’ artist-friendly spaces closed up as steampunk bars and Ace Hotels opened. While the 18b Arts District isn’t nearly that costly, it still creates another complication in the always-precarious business of showing and selling art.

“Artists understand that. We know that we’re the guinea pig for real estate people. But the rents in the Arts District are past the point of people being able to afford them,” says Stellmon. “The [Contemporary Arts Center] is an institution that has been here 26 years and they can’t afford a space downtown. You have an Arts District without contemporary art.”

To that point, there have been a number of gallery closings: Dust, VAST, Main Gallery and, most recently, the Trifecta Gallery. The Arts Factory, home to more than a dozen galleries (as well as a yoga studio, skate shop and bar/restaurant), is on the market. First Friday has moved from the side streets of Main Street and Casino Center to a more manageable space on the other side of Charleston – a spot better suited to pop-up art kiosks and food trucks.

But Las Vegas are nothing if not survivors, and artists are no exception. Even if no “whales” have come to drop a bankroll, these creative survivors have found a few allies. The city of Las Vegas has sponsored a variety of projects created by local artists – not only in the Arts District, but all over the Valley. The more visible endeavors include the Zap boxes in a number of neighborhoods, where local artists enliven blank, gray utilities with individualized artwork. Other projects have included bus shelters along Paradise Road and Main Street, and a series of art benches and a “signature sculpture” as part of the Main Street Improvement Project.

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“I do think that the county public art program will have a tremendous impact on Las Vegas and be as important as the creation of the 18b arts district downtown,” says Richard Hooker. “It will draw people into an arts experience and more importantly will provide artists opportunities to work.”

Less obviously, the city offers other options for artists trying to get their works seen by the public, particularly at a time when spaces to exhibit are becoming harder to find. “There’s not a lot of galleries to show at anymore,” says Favela, “so we’re showing at the government center. We’re showing at the community center. It’s very important and encouraging to artists.”

Casinos are also an unlikely ally. Steve Wynn has flaunted his art collection since the days when he hung up Monets and Picassos where the Desert Inn’s blackjack tables used to be. But newer casinos are integrating art into the property and the experience. “I think the casinos and large-scale properties started realizing that their clientele were more sophisticated than they were before, so fine art started making more and more sense,” says Quinn. “It was also evident that many pieces created a unique environment that could not be easily copied by any competitor.”

City Center made pieces by Henry Moore and Maya Lin essential to its design; Nancy Rubins’ Big Edge sculpture sits in the center of the entry, taking the idea of the Vegas casino neon sign or porte-cochere to the next level. The Cosmopolitan uses art displays as part of the property’s identity, from the Tracy Emin on the marquee to the Shepherd Fairey in the garage. There’s also room for up-and-comers at its P3Studio, where artists spend a month “in residence” in Las Vegas, and tourists can take a peek at the creative process through glass walls, much as they might watch a Bellagio fountain.

As Las Vegas looks to diversify its revenue stream with new attractions, art may be one of the ways to accomplish it. “Vegas visitor demographics are changing,” says Aurore Giguet, program director at UNLV’s Marjorie Barrick Museum. “It’s a younger crowd interested in experiences, post-able experiences — dining, clubs, music and art.” Without a casino-sized bankroll, local museums also are seeking new angles and new audiences. The Barrick and the Neon Museum have partnered for lectures, most recently with artist-in-residence and local David Sanchez Burr. The Barrick now offers lectures, film screenings, family projects and an “art bar” that allows visitors to create their own works. “The audience demands and requirements are changing in this generation,” Giguet says. “There are still people who come in and just like to see a white space, where it’s quiet — where they can just experience the art one-on-one. And then there’s others that like the hands-on (experience).”

“There isn’t an existing infrastructure to support a lot of organizations,” says Kelly. “Partnerships are essential.” When organizations work together, she says, art becomes “more accessible to different kinds of people. It allows for more interpretations. ... it makes it more dimensional in a way that, I think, is far more accurate to this city — something more open-ended and changeable.”

This sort of collaborative, flexible structure seems to be what many have in mind for a contemporary art museum in Las Vegas, an idea bandied about since before the Las Vegas Art Museum closed in 2009. Quinn encourages people “to think about an institution that could be unique to us specifically, something more interactive, that speaks more to our environment and the history of art in the community. Not just importing works for the sake of exhibition.” Giguet agrees that the traditional big space for a big collection might not be the ticket for getting a contemporary art museum in Las

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Vegas. “Starting small, maybe a satellite of some other institution,” she offers. “Growing your audience, growing your supporters and then growing your facility.”

If the art scene is to continue to develop, its proponents may also need to think expansively and collaboratively. “If you want to be a serious artist in Las Vegas, you need to focus beyond the small gallery spaces here,” says Ramirez, noting the accessibility of public spaces and pop-up galleries. “More important than showing in a gallery is showing in the community, and getting them interested in your work.” Art in unusual places varies from James Turrell’s installations at Louis Vuitton in City Center to Favela’s repurposing of a North Las Vegas minimart. “There are simply more practicing artists, more of a critical mass having its own constituencies and many artists now are working more across experimental platforms as opposed to traditional forms like studio/exhibition spaces,” explains Richard Hooker.

Stellmon says that one “of the missions of (Contemporary Arts Center’s) reinvention is to bring art to more areas in Las Vegas. I think that’s something that’s potentially really important.”

Those efforts toward expanding both the social and geographical audience have included a recent talk with Las Vegas art sensei Dave Hickey at the Smith Center. One of Hickey’s chief topics was Michael Heizer’s “City,” a monumental art piece about 150 miles from Las Vegas on a parcel that an alliance of environmentalists and art lovers is attempting to have declared a National Historic Site. It’s the sort of cross-community support for a major project that can raise our city’s artistic profile. “They’re starting to recognize us on the map,” says Joseph Watson. But “I would like to see the Vegas Arts District make more of an impact on people outside of Vegas.”

“We don’t have the kinds of cultural institutions other cities have,” says Danielle Kelly, an artist and executive director at The Neon Museum. But “we have other things. The desert is incredibly vibrant, diverse and expansive. And I think the city is the same way. You have to check your assumptions at the door to open yourself up to what there is.”

The future of the Las Vegas arts scene may require embracing our city’s natural tendencies, not fighting them: Roll with the winning streak, change the headliner, build it up and tear it down. But also shake hands with the guy across the table and know when to split the pot.