

**DEFINING THE  
LAS VEGAS  
ARTIST**

**2025 - 2026**

DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

A Collection of 32 Essays of This Time and Place

Reverend Ethan Acres	Heather Harmon
Robert Beckmann	Brent Holmes
Erik Beehn	Charlie Huffer
Frederic Bonin-Pissaro	Darren Johnson
Mark Brandvik	Yoko Kondo Konopik
Diane Bush	Lance Mazmanian
JW Caldwell	Michael.Patrick.Thieme
Zoe Camper	Javier Sanchez
Daniel Chenin	Jay Shively
CouperRuss	Sean Slattery
Lolita Develay	Hills Snyder
Laura Esbensen	Deanne Sole
Katie B Funk	Brett Sperry
Nancy Good	Michael Stark
Michelle Graves	Eric Strain
Gordy Grundy	Jeffrey Vallance

**ART REPORT TODAY**  
LAS VEGAS

DEFINING  
THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

2025 – 2026

## A PRAYER FROM REVEREND ETHAN ACRES

(Whispered through a cracked speaker at the Golden Nugget buffet)

O God of Neon and Ruin...  
of flaming dice, pawned wedding rings,  
and fur coats draped over the thin arms of a Giacometti by the blind...  
bless this city of divine excess.

Las Vegas was my first cathedral.  
I preached drunk on hope and glitter,  
screamed hallelujahs into slot machine choirs,  
died in a motel room and woke up rebranded.

You cannot be sentimental here.  
This is a city for those willing to detonate their identity  
and walk out of the smoke a stranger.

There is no purity, only spectacle.  
There is no resurrection, only reinvention.  
Again. And again. And again.

So, bless this desert whore.  
Bless its wreckage.  
Bless the ghosts.  
And bless the next poor fool who steps into the desert  
thinking they'll just pass through.

Amen.

DEFINING  
THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST  
2025 – 2026

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

*Art Report Today* will donate copies of this printed book to all Las Vegas and Clark County Libraries.

The softcover book is available at Amazon Books. All profits will be donated to Las Vegas arts organizations.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026902763

ISBN: 979-8-9945423-0-9

Produced by *Art Report Today*

All copyrights are individually held by their respective authors.

© Gordy Grundy

**ART REPORT TODAY**

LAS VEGAS



Prayer by Reverend Ethan Acres	5	91	Hills Snyder
Essay Index	9	95	Charlie Vegas Jason Huffer
Foreword by Gordy Grundy	11	99	Lance Mazmanian
Brent Holmes	13	103	Michael.Patrick.Thieme
Deanne Sole	23	105	Daniel Joseph Chenin
Jeffrey Vallance	27	109	Frédéric Bonin-Pissarro
Lolita Develay	33	111	Nancy Good
Mark Brandvik	37	115	Darren Johnson
JW Caldwell	45	125	¡Katie B Funk!
Zoë Camper	51	133	Javier Sanchez
Laura Esbensen	55	139	Robert Beckmann
Brett W. Sperry	59	143	Jay Shively
Eric Strain	63	147	Gordy Grundy
Diane Bush	69	151	Yoko Kondo Konopik
CouperRuss	73	159	Erik Beehn
Sean Slattery	79	163	Heather Harmon
Michelle Graves	83	169	Author Index
Michael K. Stark	87		

## FOREWORD

Las Vegas is a phenomenon. There is no place quite like the man-made wonder in Southern Nevada. It stands to reason that the local art community must be equally as fantastic.

This collection of thirty-two essays reveal some bright ideas from the busy minds in this creative colony. As each artist stands unique, we are able to present a living sketch to understand and define the artists in this place, at this time.

~ Gordy Grundy, Editor-in-Chief, *Art Report Today*

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### BRENT HOLMES

**I'LL STATE THAT** I dislike definitions. Art, or art-making, is a maelstrom of individuated aspects that repudiate constraint, at least when the process is well cared for. Imputing an artist to any given location is diminutizing, at best. Regardless, every artist's cultural environment has an osmotic effect, and observant individuals are intuitively inclined to distill what they absorb.

Taking any city pulling back its sinews for a glimpse at the bones confronts us with a set of services provided to its body, populous, or when searching for definition not provided. The essence of any metropolis lies in what it does and does not do. Its providence and systems, both macro and micro, are influenced by economic and ecological forces. In Vegas, the economy is service in its most astringent neoliberal modality,

and the majority of the city lives in nearly exclusive support of that. Put differently, if you are not a service worker, entertainer, or financially flush, the City rarely shows up. Art, under these circumstances, is acceptable as long as it serves our industry.

Several initial factors must be stated to direct us in understanding.

First, Las Vegas is a celebrity. Despite its relatively small population and lack of even the most tertiary material industry, Las Vegas can match the hegemony levels of far more influential cities and locations. Speak its name almost anywhere in the world, and recognition will follow.

Second, this is a desert town. Desert living is

necessarily hard. From the most windblown shack to our glinting, frenzied megalopolis, the matter at hand will always be scarcity. Thought here is generous finance, water, and consumables. Las Vegas shares very little of its largess with its citizens. Civic engagement, community, and cultural fortitude pump from a well dried by the searing indifference of its corporate superstructures'. Identity and consciousness more a flaw in the program than

Third, it is a tourist Mecca. It has 40 million people passing through it every year (like your mom). In response to that influx, it's a hyper-adaptive, even progressive, bending to the tilt of populist novelty. Lacking attractive natural wonders or laudable history, Las Vegas is primarily observed through passing impressions and novelty, forced to coax its audience repeatedly to maintain its status.

Finally, there's the reality that Las Vegas is an arts haven. Not in the sophisticated, bustling Manner of Manhattan, or with the sweltering sensualism of New Orleans, but in its own cloying way through the solicitous production of spectacle. Vegas hosts innumerable aspects of materiality, design, and a form of showmanship that is rarely collected so thoroughly elsewhere.

The cocktail waitress grifting a smile for extra tips. The lounge pianist executing a foot-on-the-keyboard trick, playing a top ten hit. The gawking, stage-clown pratfalling their way into a laugh, the line cook blanching fingerling potatoes to pair with prime rib. The foam carving fabricator building a massive jackpot sign for a slot tournament. The topless dancer glittering her way through a purple-lit stage. The late-career superstar settling into a months-long residency. Artists all.

So we then ask how these essential factors shape Las Vegas artists. Given that art making in this century typically includes intense cultural commentary, what artwork arises from a culture geared almost exclusively towards spectacle and seduction, in the service of extraction?

Examples are in order.

Let's begin with the bigger fish.

There are interpreters from outside the city who are relevant in this conversation. Jenny Holzer's 1986 piece *Caesar's Palace*, the casino's kiosk blasting "Protect me from what I want" in LED light, is as Vegas, a piece of art that's been allowed to exist. David Lynch's interpretation of

our city as an absurdist, hollow, flatland in *The Return* is worth more words than I can write here. Ugo Rondinone's *Seven Magic Mountains* might have something to say, but I'm too busy listening to Little Jimmy Scott's version of "Nothing Compares 2U" to care.

Tim Bavington's striking formalist musical compositions come color fields, are, to pull a contextually ambiguous quote from David Pagel, "just the right mix of freedom and necessity, will and determinism, order and randomness, work and play, rigor and recklessness."

Sounds a lot like a town I know. Bavington's work, sans critique, is the byproduct of the instruction of art critic and public intellectual David Hickey. He is of a University of Nevada, Las Vegas MFA cohort that includes the exceptional Sush Machida, whose bubblegum interpretations of traditional Japanese aesthetics I adore, and David Ryan, a formalist master of abstraction whose work winks slyly at Vegas signage. Of this group, a common ascetic sensibility of aggregating soft line, bright pigment, and mediated space reflects the city in which they honed themselves.

Hickey's ideological understanding of the city

and his guidance to a crop of young artists at the turn of the century paid great dividends toward the notion of a "Las Vegas artist" and its school of thinking. The aesthetic becomes the concept. The concept holds the notion of a neon metropolis up for analysis. The work of the above-mentioned artists and many others who received Hickey's pedagogy has a definitive ripple effect on the presentation of Las Vegas artists moving forward.

Justin Favela (a protégé of David Ryan's) provides an excellent counterpoint to the soft lines and tones of the Hickeyites. Favela is, as I compose this article, our most prominent artistic export. His sculptural practice of producing flashy, tongue-in-cheek piñatas that comment on identity, place, and the absurdity of Vegas's vision of the American dream (the one Hunter S Thompson so dubiously searched for in "Fear and Loathing") fringing the jagged edges of living in a service-industry city that feeds off of blue-collar immigrant labor.

Like Bavington, Favela comes with his own cohort of equally exceptional artists—a diverse coalition of UNLV BFA queerdos each possessing a savage absurdism with no celebrity tutor in sight. Mikayla Whitmore's blazing photographic

work, isolating the minutiae that surround and lives within the city, cribbing commercial techniques to concretize the city's (and the desert's) glinting precarity. Lance Smith's soft-edged renderings of Black interiority and queer displacement resonate with the town's oppressive transience, sandstorms of emotion rolling through glass towers, while Krystal Ramirez's towering textual work chips merrily away at a culture that perfected the neon sign.

Favela's primary medium itself is an aspect summation of Las Vegas consciousness. A piñata is as much a subject of destruction as a \$500-million casino and all the hopes, dreams, lust, and devastation that occurred within it. A temple to decadence caved in with a few short blows. All the candy long since spilt out into bourbon glasses, condoms, and corporate pockets. Something in the city's consistent institutional erasure plays at the heart of its artists.

From here, we find the pond's smaller life forms. Most of them are less lauded, often conceptually driven, and intellectually divergent. Artists with day jobs, local hustlers, and stray dogs (or dogfish, am I fucking this metaphor, oh well) that may just bite.

Admirable individuals like muralist Jerry Misko, whose diligently organized, graphically oriented, standardized style abstracts the architecture and signage of the city, slicing thin portions of the whole off to inspect their beauty. He's two parts technician to one part used car salesman. Misko embodies the scrappy local hustler ethos while building a vernacular of our vernacular.

Eric Vozzola is another cherished muralist who has developed a refreshing take on Southwest aesthetics. His massive paintings dance across the eye on public thoroughfares, creating a complex codex of familiar images composed in bright, exciting arrays. His uniquely Las Vegas take on the desert sunsets and wilderness is irrefutably ours.

Certainly, JW Caldwell is a definitive Vegas artist, cigarette in one hand, paintbrush in another, and cold beer waiting for him at one of the city's nicotine-stained dive bars once he finishes his latest text-based work. Weighty, clever phrases paired with deceptively simple renderings of dinosaurs or Paleolithic megafauna. Postcards to send to loved ones while touring the apocalypse. His sharp-toothed cynicism gnashes away at our future ghost town.

Consider Alexander Sky—downtown mainstay and all-around good-time guy. His chaotic street art is as culturally engaged as that of any creative in the scene. Sky keeps it grimy, a crucial ingredient in the Vegas soup that identifies the city away from its Southwest cousins. He produces heart-on-sleeve images that live in the funk of a town built on g-strings and liquor bottles, a personification of our go-easy attitude.

Or Ika Pearl, and their use of common objects, skillful drawings, and writing midwifing mixed-media mutant babies, the whiff of atomic radiation passing through, simply to inform you that a diaper change is in order. Pearl holds the intimate with dirt under their fingers and tremulous hands, shielding it from the onslaught of fabricated identity.

In the realm of representational painting that captures our city's visual lexicon, Gig Depio, Brian Martinez, Sam Ganados, and Q'shaundra James take Neoclassical and pop-surrealist perspectives and tell our city its story back to it.

Depio's massive canvases land just shy of Rivera-scale social dramas. He portrays the heaving thrust of a culture without completion, our history and tumult piled on thick as his paint, di-

recting all vectors toward secreted discourses.

Martinez's frenzy of wild psychedelic luchadores, Chicano touchstones, and Americana is a bilingual discourse with spectacle itself. His renderings, in all of their skill and nuance, are incapable of existing without a touch of Vegas kitsch.

Ganados collects everyday social scenes of youthful frivolity (a core component of our city's appeal) and embeds the viewer halfway into a blunt rotation at the skate park. Her proficiency in depicting the fray of bodies in action, frivolity, and the darker, more emotive events of social life in a little Southwest town with a big name morphs anyplace-USA into our place.

James renders more liminal states and environments. Her portraits of people and places highlight a domesticity that is often overlooked. She paints sprawling, low-rise housing, spare living rooms, and images of people clinging to popular iconography as humanizing fetishes, holding the line between desperation, domesticity, and pop culture in a way that can only be discovered in this city.

The assemblage crowd on many levels speaks to the truest nature of the city. Sifting through

detritus provided by infinite, hot inebriated evenings, the refuse left by hyper-capitalist consumption, poker felt from a gambler's lament. DK Sole and Quindo Miller take the flotsam of our city, preserving it.

Sole, a land artist working with the materials the land provides, creates miniature takes on monumental sculptures, out of bottle caps, bits of string, and wire. They are a catalogue of the liminal, the things we forget, we have forgotten.

Miller takes trimmings and samples from their lived experience and places them in terrariums that capture wet desert washes, wind-swept plateaus, and Micronesian living rooms on karaoke night—theatrical sets containing real-life moments, scenes from a hotel lobby in their mind.

Performance artists round out our mix.

In truth, Vegas is one long, hideous, sprawling performance piece. Your bartender, waiter, poker dealer, valet, and stripper would tell you that if you took any time to listen. The performative nature of a town that's "always on" leads to persona exhaustion. Adriana Chavez, Heidi Rider, Karla Lagunas, and Ali Fathollahi are prime exemplars.

Chavez brings bluster and machismo to the fore with Juan Chico, her alter ego interpretation of Latino masculinity. Based in the body She silently prods the farce of male identity while excavating the artifacts of Indigenous and colonial history that it contains. Chavez gives comically harsh commentary on the individuals Las Vegas thrives on.

Rider trots out the sad clown. Her performance work dwells in the exhaustion from the infinite night of crowd-pleasing. Weeping, through a moment's respite between curtain calls. Her brilliance lies in small gestures and muffled screams. An entertainer threadbare from excessive exposure to audience. Glaring at our collective folly from the spotlight.

Lagunas' work lives in precarity. Her paintings and performances reach for the impossible, as do so many doe-eyed dreamers who migrate to our town. Art made ferial by utopian dreaming and the identity crisis that follows. Inevitably, she embodies the experiences of individuals provided just enough rope to hang themselves with. Her exposition of our collective dissatisfaction burns going down, a shot with no chaser.

Fathollahi's hyper-cerebral work is survival-ori-

ented, based on the need to play Swiss Army knife in the pocket of a place that perceives its patrons as marks and its citizens as servants. His performance work is a product of the dark levity that's born through forced migration and the persistent manipulation of American identity.

An outlier here or possibly the core of this thing. When looking for what can be defined as a Las Vegas artist. In a transient city where most neighbors are strangers, that often fails in the most basic adequacy of cultural infrastructure, space, and community, are high-value commodities. Artists who will-together social structures and cultural spaces are not as ubiquitous as they may be in Chicago, New York, or LA, but these individuals and groups set the tone for Vegas's cultural identity.

Chase McCurdy is a historic west side artist, so dedicated to the underserved black community that lives in the shadow of downtown Las Vegas, that I hesitate to call him a Las Vegas artist. His vision for a little-known and less-loved section of the city transcends the excellence of his personal practice. Chase's 33g is an artspace, and a gathering place for creative experimentation, cultural education, and social change.

Fawn Douglas' Nuwu Art + Activism Studios provides working artists with studios, a gallery, and a gathering spot. Add to that her activism, powerful art practice, Paiute lineage, and dedication to nourishing the indigenous community the land was stolen from, and you are looking at an artist whose methodology predates the colonial name Las Vegas.

Then there's Wendy Kveck, a Las Vegas arts grand dame if there's ever been one. Her intense feminist work is nearly dwarfed by her persistent role as organizer, curator, and place maker (albeit digital). Her long-form catalogue of the city's transient arts culture through her website Couch in the Desert, lobbying for arts funding, and guidance for artists in all manner of creative pursuits as an educator, places her as one of our great social engineers.

In the sphere of the communal arts collectives, the trend is long-standing. Many hands make short work, and The Contemporary Arts Center, Lazervida, Black Bird Studios, The Katherine Gianacis Park for the Arts, and The Nevada Institute of Contemporary Arts, all defunct organizations, remain major contributors to what defines an artist in this community.

Recently, the city-breaking, Scrambled Eggs as an art collective has provided a diverse, raucous vision for contemporary art that is currently setting the pace for Vegas. These events and exhibitions are the most forward-thinking, diverse, and stunning showings on par with anything you might find in other towns. Organised by a star-studded cast of brilliant young art makers so large and excellent that they deserve a story that cannot be fleshed out here.

If we look long and hard at the praxis of establishing arts havens as the art form it is, Left of Center Gallery, helmed by artist Vicki Richardson, takes the cake. Left of Center's thirty-year legacy of showcasing local talent in an out-of-the-way neighborhood bordering North Las Vegas is the most consistent and impactful I can think of. The founders and maintainers of Left of Center, Harold Bradford an incredible draftsman and painter who art directed at the city's neon sign giant, Yesco, for decades, Sylvester Collier, whose soulful mark making resonates volumes of Black life, and Richardson's unwavering determination to bring art and arts education to the valley may be more stabilizing than any effort to date.

If you haven't been included, it's for several

reasons: I don't know your work well enough, or you are more international, national, West Coast, or even Nevadan to be summed up in shorthand. I'm not getting paid enough (am I getting paid for this?) to mention every excellent Vegas visionary and how their work relates to our staggeringly unfair city. I genuinely forgot, or I don't like your art (yes, you Pretty Done). Regardless, I question if we can find an individual artist or group whose work is within the realm of defining a "Las Vegas" artist (maybe it's me you paunce, you ever think about that? No, you only think about yourself!). There are too many moving parts to this machine; all we can do is stand close and listen to it hum.

From a panoptic perspective, the artists in Las Vegas are those set about its dismantling, prying from different angles to show us how the engine works.

The thing is... everywhere is Las Vegas now. We as a culture YOLOing towards the precipice of societal collapse. Frivolous mass marketing campaigns, service as key economic driver, flashy games, facile celebrity, facade as artifact, spectacle as sacred, twenty-five-dollar burger and fries, the last vestiges of a culture in decline. The artist's obligation to report upon these and so many

other modern atrocities that began in Sin City is now a broader subject. Vegas was once the rare metropolitan area where conmen could openly pose as leaders and mobsters could register as businessmen, something that is now just our way of life.

Las Vegas artists possess the same qualities as artists throughout the world. Like all desert dwellers, they are scrappy and resourceful. Earnest yet performative, like any survivor of a service-based economy. Diligent and technically adept in the way one must be to surf a media frenzy. Acutely aware of historical erasure, as any individual accustomed to institutional collapse becomes. The question I fear is not what defines a Las Vegas artist, but how much of Las Vegas defines the broader culture, and when that question is answered, the one that remains is why aren't Las Vegas artists more prominent in the conversation?

## BRENT HOLMES

Instagram @bread\_n\_circuses

Holmes is a artist, curator, and cultural animator whose work pushes theviewer and the limits of the possible. The son of an entertainer, Holmes utilizes art and the written word for story-telling that is rooted in African American history, struggle, and brilliance. Holmes has exhibited his artwork locally, nationally, and internationally, including at Light & Space Contemporary (Manila, Philippines), the Markeaton street gallery in Derby England, The Momentary art museum in Bentonville, Arkansas, the Torrance Art Museum in California, the Tacoma Museum of Art in Tacoma WA, the Nevada Museum of Art Reno, and the Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art, where his work is part of the permanent collection at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Holmes has won accolades for his writing and art criticism for *Double Scoop Nevada*, and has been published by the *Believer*, *New York Times Magazine*, and *HyperAllergic*. He is the host of Neon Hum Medias' Spectacle: Las Vegas a twelve part series on the city's history as a representation of American cultural values.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### DEANNE SOLE

**DEFINING THE LAS** Vegas artist! I don't know whether I should be soothed or agitated by that idea. I prevaricate. I want to diffuse myself everywhere, like Maurice Maeterlinck: "Spring balances, scales, weighing machines, steelyards, drawbridges, all merely subdivide, canalize, and register the will or energy that comes from the centre of the earth, not forgetting the challenge of all the stars and planets, which modify this will; so that when we weigh a pound of sugar we invoke the counsel or collaboration of all the matter dispersed throughout the universe." Reading over that sentence from his *Death* reminds me of that bit in Proust where the author considers the end of the planet. "People pursue their pleasures from habit without ever thinking, were etiolating and moderating influences to cease, that the proliferation of the infusoria

would attain its maximum, that is to say, making a leap of many millions of leagues in a few days and passing from a cubic millimeter to a mass a million times larger than the sun, at the same time destroying all the oxygen of the substances upon which we live, that there would no longer be any humanity or animals or earth ..." and casually he segues into dinner at the the Verdurins. Wonderful. If only I were Proust, I would say something stunning. You would be amazed. But he is the last person I should go to for ideas about defining the Las Vegas artist. Maybe, no, maybe not the last; there are billions of others who have lived on this earth who would have an equal amount of no-idea-at-all about artists in Las Vegas. Then what is the point, I suppose? They were very happy not knowing. Maybe I would be equally happy if I never thought about it.

What if Proust had moved to Las Vegas? Maybe it would have been better for his health, the dryness? But no, the hayfever would have killed him. But he liked Coca-cola? There's lots of Coca-Cola here. I had some Coca-cola yesterday in fact. Never mind. But it's an interesting idea, defining the Las Vegas artist. A nice way to strike a person dumb. Could an artist in Delft be defined by the "little patch of yellow wall" Proust saw in Vermeer's *View of Delft*? No, the little patch of wall evades Delft. It subsumes Delft. It is more like Maeterlinck's "will or energy that comes from the centre of the earth." I mean sublime.

Writing "Delft" three times in succession like that (View of Delft, evades Delft, subsumes Delft) gives me odd ideas about Delft. The closer I get to it the weirder it seems. After the third time I wonder: what is the meaning of Delft? I feel the shape of the letters; the sound of "elft" in my head seems unwieldy, it is harder to mentally utter.

Even the "ft" is an unnatural combination. Maybe Las Vegas artists are like someone who says Las Vegas Las Vegas Las Vegas over and over again until it turns into fog in their heads. Then we can't make the place any more. Or we incorporate it so thoroughly that we radiate it

in waves. (I am going to include myself in this group of artists by saying "we," because why not.) If we choose to mention the casinos then they are not nightclub gambling conglomerates any more, they are like homes. Think of Adriana Chavez's performance-art character, Juan Chico, expanding out of a unity between the artist's family and the Circus Circus, the synergy between the older male relatives and the precise flavour of that exact casino, the site of family excursions, not new and shining but old and familiar, like a tree. Something like that? Or there's the intimate but buried connection between Justin Favela's cardboard sculpture of a sign that once advertised an American Chinese restaurant and James Stanford's *Fong's Garden*, a kaleidoscopic print that includes images of the same sign. "The spot was one of my favorite restaurants as a child. My mother taught English to Wing Fong when he first arrived in Las Vegas from China," explained Stanford in the book about the series, *Shimmering Zen: Inspired by the Neon Lights of Las Vegas*. The restaurant is an outlier among the mass of casinos in the Shimmering Zen series. I assume it wouldn't be there if not for the collaboration between the artist's mother and Wing Fong, a partnership that is not spoken about anywhere else in history. In 2017 Checko Salgado curated a show about pareido-

lia in the Basin and Range National Monument, but we already see faces here. We see a personality in a corner of Industrial Road, in the view of the mountains from the road to Summerlin; we can intuit an ineffable character infusing the crowd of ducks around the tiki head in Sunset Park; we witness one of those bland, domineering roadside berms with a metal bighorn sheep on it and see the relationship between the gravel, the sky, the metal, and the traffic cone that is cutting off our access to the lane at the bottom.

The city of Delft in Vermeer's painting is laid out with the clouds above it, away from the viewer, across the flat line of a river. It is something like the silhouette of the Strip they use in advertisements and postcards. There are peaks, turrets, irregularities picked out in the skyline: the river is flat and silvery as the desert or suburbs are flat and sand-coloured, the clouds are overhead, filled with water—not really like desert clouds, but my point is that he is looking at the sky, Vermeer, the place where the sky meets the buildings, the way Las Vegas is often pictured. "The iconic skyline ..." All he needs is a skywheel and a pyramid. The sky takes up more than half the canvas. *View of Delft* is really a view of sky with some Delft underneath. We could look up

at that too, not the houses or the buildings or even the desert, but the steadiness of the sky.

## DEANNE SOLE

@dksole on Instagram

Deanne Sole is a Las Vegas-based Australian artist. She works at the Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art, where she practices curation and edits the museum's art writing publication, *Dry Heat*.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### JEFFREY VALLANCE

**INVITED BY PROFESSOR** and MacArthur Fellow Dave Hickey, I became a visiting artist at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, in 1995. I soon found there were no fine art museums in town. Yet, there was a multitude of outrageous Vegas-themed museums like the Clown, Magic, Cranberry, and Liberace museums. How do you define a city? By its artist community, or the number of museums?

It became my quest to curate art exhibitions in every museum on The Strip.

...

When I was young, I never really liked Las Vegas. My family would take long cross-country trips in our station wagon and inevitably pass

through Vegas in the middle of the night. It was always as hot as hell.

Upon taking up residence there, I immediately evaluated the situation: Las Vegas's fabulously glamorous museums could be perfect sites for art exhibitions.

The Liberace Museum was the first institution I approached with my "perverted agenda": to infiltrate and subvert Vegas reality. A Liberace portrait show was planned. First, I had to round up a band of glamorous Las Vegas artists.

I brought in itinerant preacher/painter, Reverend Ethan Acres;

Necrogen Corporation president, Michael Westfall, who recreated mythical creatures

using different parts of dead animals cut up, sewn together, and crammed into formaldehyde jars;

Victoria Reynolds, who lived in a Beirut-ish military bunker-like complex, meticulously rendered ornate paintings of raw meat;

Mary Warner, who made beautiful black velvet paintings;

Jane Callister, from the Isle of Man, whose work resembles elaborate, sickly sweet cake decorations;

Phil Argent, who paints gigantic and garish paintings of personalized Nevada license plates emblazoned with the word “Methlab”;

Troy Swain, maker of superhero action figures of Nietzsche, Foucault, Marx, Freud, Duchamp, Warhol, Pollock, etc., complete with power packs and specialized futuristic weapons;

Desert photographer Charles Morgan;

Steven Molasky (of The Molasky Group), who made shimmering light box contraptions filled with dangling Vegas icons;

From the far Canadian north, Christine Siemens, who made rubber membrane-like wall hangings;

Ron Lee, who had a factory that pumps out clown statuettes by the thousands; and

James Gobel, who created marvelous glitter portraits of Rip Taylor and paintings of

an overweight Jesus.

Included with this group of glitterati were a host of other glamorous artists who made amazing contributions. Championing all this was the mastermind of Vegas, Dave Hickey, writer and art critic extraordinaire.

Each Vegas show I curated had a character all its own, with specific guidelines and rules set forth by each museum. For the Liberace show, as the entertainer never publicly acknowledged that he was gay during his lifetime, as requested by the museum, we had to be respectful of his image and not let him out of the closet.

The amazing Liberace Museum was wonderfully completely crammed with his bejeweled outfits, custom cars, rare pianos, photos of the pianist with every possible celebrity, and loads of little stuffed poodles. There was hardly any place to put the art, so I had to install the work in between the existing displays, making it almost impossible to tell the art from Liberacean artifacts.

Artist Wayne Littlejohn displayed a piece entitled *Tinkling on the Ivories* that looked like somebody tore a chunk out of Liberace’s bathroom. It had part of a tiled wall with a gold-leafed jewel-encrusted toilet paper holder. The

toilet paper was printed with religious Renaissance paintings, giving the impression that Liberace wiped his derriere with the Old Masters.

...

The next art show was at the fabulous Debbie Reynolds Hotel/Casino/Museum. As the only restriction, Debbie had to look “glamorous.” (At one time, Debbie saw an uncomplimentary image of herself, painted by a student, and she was very disturbed.) This installation followed the same procedure: Art was dispersed throughout the casino among Hollywood props, slot machines, and antique movie cameras.

The opening was a star-studded affair, with Paul Revere and the Raiders flashing through in full regalia. Out from behind one of the paintings popped a Robert De Niro impersonator who was beckoning “Come out, Come out, Wherever you are!” from Scorsese’s 1991 “Cape Fear.” In front of another painting was an octogenarian health nut profusely sweating while doing calisthenics. A well-coiffed Rip Taylor pranced in, wearing a flamboyant Ascot tie while Debbie Reynolds, looking as radiant as ever, held court.

...

Twenty minutes out of town, in the middle of an almost Martian landscape is Ron Lee’s World of Clowns Museum. The clown show featured everything from a crying and praying clown, a newborn clown, and a genuine John Wayne Gacey painting, to artifacts such as a glowing clown skull and a preserved specimen of a clown/salamander mutation. Presiding over this gaudy circus was the ever-perky Lara the Clown (Lara Heidtman Smith).

Located in an isolated desert ravine, Cathedral Canyon resembles an abandoned Christian sculpture park. The site is located on a turnoff from Highway 160 on the way from Las Vegas to Pahrump, a haven for Nevada’s legal prostitution. The canyon is a hole out in the middle of nowhere that was transformed into a cathedral-like environment by outsider artist Roland Wiley.

Since his death, the canyon has suffered much destruction by vandals. Most of the beautiful stained-glass windows, religious statues, and baroque candelabras have been smashed to pieces. From time to time, we went down to the canyon with new statues, decorations, and artwork to place in the canyon’s grottoes and niches. Alas, these too are short-lived, as we find them

smashed, shot, or gone altogether. The only exception were the well camouflaged or those hidden in the deepest recesses of the caves.

...

The next Las Vegas, Nevada show was situated near the Arctic Circle, in Umeå, Sweden, at the Västerbottens Maritime Museum. The museum displayed fish hooks, stuffed seals, and oars. In one room was a full-size tugboat, where Swedish artist Karin Persson turned the captain's quarters into a bordello, while Ronny Hansson filled the "whole damn hold" of the ship with pea soup, and Carina Gunnars turned the hall into a throbbing disco with fog machine and laser lights.

Most of the art from Las Vegas was displayed along a descending wheelchair ramp. The Reverend Acres decorated the boat with Walmart Santa Claus cut-outs, for Saint Nick is the patron saint of seamen. Not surprisingly once everything fell into place, the boat was barely distinguishable. It caused quite a controversy in the press and the museum's attendance increased a thousandfold over that month.

...

Back on the Strip, the next show at the Magic and the Movie Hall of Fame in O'Shea's Hilton Casino was underway. The maze-like Magic Museum featured dioramas of magicians' props, Houdini artifacts, mechanical robots, ventriloquist dummies, and Hollywood memorabilia. Proprietor and famed ventriloquist Valentine Vox, popped out, as if by magic, from dark corners of the museum, ready to answer any questions about the mysterious objects therein.

The museum was believed to be haunted by the ghost of Harry Houdini, as many of his important magic relics were housed there. The art was so well integrated into the displays that at the opening an angry woman stomped out saying, "Where's the art? I thought this was an art show!"

In the audio animatronic display of Dr Frankenstein's lab, Michael Westfall placed his formaldehyde monstrosities. Next to the magician Blackstone's table saw for cutting women in half was a beautiful painting of meat by Victoria Reynolds. In the Curse of the Mummy display, Rob Keller meticulously placed sad little homemade mummies of roadkill squirrels, rabbits, rats, and snakes. Adjacent to John Travolta's original suit from Saturday Night Fever was Myonghae Lee's

precisely rendered portrait of Patrick Swayze.

...

The Cranberry Show was located at the Cranberry Museum in the Cranberry World West Visitors' Center at the Ocean Spray processing plant. Ocean Spray's Vegas mascot is Carina the Cran-Cran Showgirl, a giant dancing piece of fruit with huge grimacing teeth and a feathery showgirl headdress.

Ocean Spray went all out for the opening reception with a bountiful spread of fabulous cranberry delicacies, including cranberry burritos with cranberry salsa, cranberry coffee, and one hell of a cranberry tiramisu.

A highlight of the installation was a piece by art critic David Pagel entitled The Legend of the Cranberet which was incorporated into a diorama about cranberry harvesting. A life-sized mechanical farm worker operated a harvesting machine, while Pagel's miniature cranberry-colored soldiers fought amidst piles of the fruit. Near the juice bottling assembly line was a piece by the Reverend Acres showing Carina the Cran-Cran Showgirl looking like the Whore of Babylon riding the Beast of the Apocalypse.

...

About that time, I started thinking about curating shows at the Burlesque Museum and the Brothel Museum. Both erotic institutions were located in the scorching vastness of the Mojave Desert. But alas, it was never to be.

One day while I was having a serious phone conversation with a clown, it dawned on me how weird my life had become in Las Vegas. I'd been hanging out with clowns, freaks, magicians, ventriloquists, religious fanatics, compulsive gamblers, showgirls, strippers, dwarves, academics, midgets, UFO experts, alien abductees, lounge singers, has-been stars, and giant cranberries.

I wouldn't have traded it for the world.

In addition to his exhibitions, Vallance has contributed writing to *Art issues.*, *Artforum*, *L.A. Weekly*, *Juxtapoz*, and *Frieze*. He is also the author of several books, including *Blinky the Friendly Hen*, *The World of Jeffrey Vallance*, *The Vallance Bible*, and *Voyage to Extremes: Collected Spiritual Writings*.

## JEFFREY VALLANCE

TanyaBonakdarGallery.com

Born in 1955 in Redondo Beach, California, Jeffrey Vallance is a Los Angeles-based artist whose work blurs the boundaries between object-making, installation, performance, curating, and writing. His often site-specific projects range from burying a frozen chicken in a pet cemetery to holding audiences with the King of Tonga and creating a museum dedicated to Richard Nixon.

In 2004, Vallance curated the only art-world exhibition devoted to the “Painter of Light™,” *Thomas Kinkade: Heaven on Earth*. That same year, he was awarded the prestigious John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship. Earlier in his career, he appeared as the host of MTV’s *The Cutting Edge* (1983) and as a guest on NBC’s *Late Night with David Letterman*.

## LOLITA DEVELAY

HOW WOULD I define the Las Vegas Artist?

Defining the Las Vegas Artist is something of an impossible task. The way I view Artists are that they/we are much too individual to be grouped into a single identity. We all know that each human is a distinct individual. Artists have singled themselves out even further because Art and Artifact are the forms of a person’s voice. Considering Las Vegas Artists as a monolith negates these individual complex qualities that distinguish them and the full Art community we are.

What I have observed that approaches sameness is a sense of passion and intensity. Artists in Las Vegas carry a deep and visible passion for Art itself. It is irrelevant if that Art is ornamental or Fine; it is loved for its existence. In Las

Vegas, as within the overall Art World, Artists are painting, they are performing, they are installing, sculpting, conceptual work, Art is here in all of its form—there is room for all of it, and sometimes they are all in the vicinity of one another.

Las Vegas does not offer a singular aesthetic, school, or movement that can be neatly labeled. Las Vegas offers its own conditions, Heat, Speed, Visibility, Impermanent, Opportunity, and always Chance. These conditions shape artists without dictating the formal outcome of the work or direction that form takes. Artists live in different places throughout the valley, some close to each other some on opposite ends, and we each respond to the city in entirely unique ways.

To define the Las Vegas Artist is not to about a look or a style within the Artist or Artwork. It is to acknowledge a mindset: adaptability, resilience, and an impassioned spirit of making work in a place that those outside of Las Vegas do not experience nearly enough. Las Vegas artists are not working in spite of the city, they are working because of and with it.

How did I get here, Las Vegas as an Artist?

I arrived in Las Vegas as an Artist with the clear idea that I would be creating Art. No matter where I had decided to move to, that was always going to be the case. I had a certain passion to continue what I had restarted in Los Angeles with both my Art and Art education.

Before moving here, I had spent years in Los Angeles following a career in different aspects of advertising, that ultimately ended with a phase out and a consideration of what I wanted from life. Painting had been part of my life since my late teens when I first began learning how to paint with Oils. I had dabbled with it here and there across the years, but it was in that moment of contemplation that I made the decision to accept being an Artist and to dedicate myself to doing Art. I built a design and video editing

studio in Hollywood while getting my first Art degree as a graphic designer and video editor. I also focused my attention on what I wanted from Painting, played with a bunch of ideas and gave in to my own personal passion of a Photorealism based style. I moved to Las Vegas without missing a beat and focused my attention on Art in Las Vegas. After relocating, I continued my education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, earning a BA in Fine Art followed by an MFA in Fine Art with a focus on painting. I loved and have always loved academic structure; I love the space it creates to isolate oneself in the pursuit of knowledge. Like many folks and Artists here, I am a transplant. Las Vegas became home not by a fortunate coincidence, but by my deliberate choices that I followed up with commitment. I did not come to Las Vegas with a specific goal in mind, but the plan was always to see what Art opportunities exist around me. What I found was a city that was rich with private, educational, municipal, county and state institutions that supported Art.

My experience is not particularly unusual in Las Vegas. Artists come here from everywhere, carrying with them lessons and sensibilities of previous lives, here they assemble something new. The city does not prioritize any particular per-

son's background. It is a City that encourages personal style over almost all else.

What binds Las Vegas artists together, even after they leave?

What binds Las Vegas artists together is not always geographically contingent. It is that personal connection, that bond that forms here and continues long after physical proximity ends.

The Las Vegas Art community is like a game of Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon. Artists here tend to know one another—sometimes directly, sometimes through shared histories or associations; it's all quite connected through formal institutions and art events.

Degrees overlap. Studios intersect. Teaching and continued mentorship beyond the classrooms create long arcs of influence. Artists move through UNLV, through community colleges, through city and county cultural institutions. Some remain in Las Vegas, sustaining themselves through teaching, public programs, and their own practice. Others leave, carrying the city with them into national and international contexts.

Las Vegas is full of creative souls that include many self-taught artists, MFAs, artists who have studied at Yale but keep their practice private, we all have varying interests—together we form a network that extends beyond the physical city limits. Students become teachers at all levels, grade school, personal practice, Professors. We Teachers proudly watch as our students enter MFA programs across the country or become Professors themselves across the country. Success often starts here and moving somewhere else does not end or sever the bond; it quite often strengthens and confirms it.

Las Vegas artists support one another in concrete and tangible ways. They show up. They assist. They share labor and visibility. I think of moments like when Kim Johnson and I helped Wendy Kveck realize her P3 project at the Cosmopolitan, or of the academic exhibitions at the Barrick and Donna Beam galleries that continue to anchor serious discourse in the city. These acts of support are not symbolic—they are structural.

Once formed, these ties persist and people connect and reconnect at various Art events. Even when artists leave Las Vegas, they remain Las Vegas artists through these bonds that we formed

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

experience Art together.

There is an unwritten understanding that endures: once a Las Vegas artist, always a Las Vegas artist.

### LOLITA DEVELAY

LolitaDevelay.com

Lolita Develay (b. Pearblossom, California) is a Las Vegas-based painter whose vibrant, meticulously painted works merge photorealist technique with analytical social commentary. She received her Master of Fine Arts in Painting from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) in 2014. Her body of work is deeply informed by her life and observations of contemporary American culture, she creates lush, chromatic oils and watercolors. She is a 2025 Visual Arts Fellow by the Nevada Arts Council.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### MARK BRANDVIK

**EVERY FEW YEARS** for as far back as I can remember, some publication or institution decides to take the temperature of art in Las Vegas. Groups of collectors from the likes of MoMA, LACMA, MOCA and the Smithsonian have wandered through our studios and our specially curated spaces. I've read the earlier installments of "Defining the Las Vegas Artist" and agree with many of the sentiments and have made similar arguments. That said, folks in Vegas tend to have wildly disparate opinions and experiences about the art scene and its history. It seems that the whole world comes through here eventually. Some stay. Some go, but leave enough residue to last. Others leave nary a trace.

I was born and raised here, so I don't readily accept every analysis of the city. Indeed, no oth-

er city receives this peculiar examination. People seem to be in constant disbelief that this place even exists, or has a reason to exist (cue the Bellagio Fountains b-roll footage for the drought piece on the nightly news). But look at a map. What Southwest metropolis sits right next door to the river? (hint: not LA, San Diego, or Phoenix... they stick 300+ mi straws through the blazing desert in open canals to extract water). Being born here doesn't make me an expert or gatekeeper per se, but it does allow me to offer a rather unique perspective. I can be the city's biggest critic, and sometimes its biggest champion. Native opinions are often dismissed, because how can one be as objective as those who chose to move here from other places? But here's the thing: others like myself chose to stay here. Growing up in Vegas in the 70s and 80s, I found

myself trying to explain and defend my mom and dad's decision to build a life here. My cousins from the Midwest and the South thought I lived on Mars. Vegas was the opposite of cool. I was constantly bombarded with Do people live there? Do you live in a casino? Long before anyone arrived to reframe Las Vegas and long before people finally realized what Robert Venturi was trying to say, the city just plodded along like a Phoenix or Albuquerque with a strip of aging casinos (I miss those casinos). But give a kid a BMX bike, a pellet gun, and a wide-open desert, and he'll entertain himself until supper time.

Las Vegas has always been a serviceable place to make art. Artists from here may show all over the world, but they create their work here. It's still a relatively cheap place to live and work. Lots of us have home/garage studios. The weather is generally good (everyone knows the summers are hot as hell...). Art spaces exist in private and former private homes. Pop up shows in hotel rooms and desert lake beds are not uncommon. A NYC gallery is setting up shop in my best friend's former house in Paradise Palms (double-check the drywall in the primary bedroom... we did some of the repairs on the fly!). I wish them luck... it has been tried here before. The contemporary gallery in my neighborhood

is in a house that was once used as a Jewish synagogue. (The Rabbi was my backyard neighbor). Mark Masuoka (later of museum director fame) lead the way in the 90s with his gallery in an old house across from Huntridge Circle Park, right next door to my future house and studio. As mentioned in a previous installment in this series, library galleries (and to a lesser extent civic art spaces), provide artists with a myriad of exhibition opportunities. I recently curated a show featuring my former students called Wily Coyotes at a local library district gallery. The galleries and museums at the local universities and colleges have also done a lot of heavy lifting in this department. There's a fairly robust public art scene in the greater Las Vegas area. I've accidentally slipped through the cracks to land some commissions. It's often a challenging world to navigate. As my former colleague used to say, most public art can be filed under the title "Spirit of the Dance". Still, there are some truly interesting public art opportunities around Vegas.

The 1990s were halcyon days in the Vegas art scene. Lots of great LA and NYC artists in residence at UNLV during that time. All were willing to maintain relationships and correspondence, even years after their residency. Jim Shaw (I seem to run into him in Vegas, LA, or

NYC every couple of years), Karen Carson (my sign shop painted some of the banners she was working on at the time), Jeffrey Vallance (I was fortunate to be included in many of his shows staged in non-traditional spaces), Justen Ladda (still a good friend), and Dike Blair (who curated a 1993 survey show of Vegas artists that used my title 49c Breakfast... a great exhibition, but many non-art world folks showed up with two quarters looking for a bite to eat) to name a few. Rev. Ethan Acres was around then. I haven't kept up with him in decades, but was happy to read his recent prayer for Vegas. We sort of mined similar territory in the 90s as it related to our fundamentalist upbringings. His project was more performative, mine was more Pop narrative. He tried to put the "fun in fundamentalism" and I tried to grapple with the "mental". Vallance once referred to me as the "Most Famous Vegas Christian Viking". I'm not sure about the first parts, but I am Norwegian. Dave Hickey called my project the "Quick Gospel" (I abandoned that project long ago and have since graduated to making art about buildings, rockets, and what-not...). I remember riding to LA in the back of Ethan's old Astro van with my girlfriend at the time, with him and his wife up front playing and singing along to Lynyrd Skynyrd on the journey. We all stayed at Karen Carson's house. Vegas

artists seemed to go to LA all the time back then. Whenever I was down there for some art crawl or event, I would always run into another Las Vegan. These days I'll ask third year grad students from Indiana or wherever and they will tell me they've never been to LA. Huh???

Most everything written about the Las Vegas art scene in the past three decades includes some mention of Dave Hickey, so let me add my personal two cents. Love him or hate him, he was a pivotal figure. Whenever I travelled to NYC or LA, ears would perk up at the mention of Las Vegas because, well, Hickey was out there. I liked Dave. He was on my BFA committee. He wrote a glowing letter of recommendation for my grad school application. I had him flown out to my grad school (UNC Chapel Hill) to give a lecture and studio visits. He pissed a lot of people off. They needed to hear what he had to say. My girlfriend (and future wife) made him a homemade meal and I gave him the fifty-cent tour. He supported me and bought some of my work, but I was never one of his acolytes. I didn't go in for his "do one thing and do it well" mantra, or his art as groovy abstract wallpaper that decorates the background of some imagined fabulous party. Good career advice perhaps, but it didn't really resonate with me. However,

I was always inspired by his belief that artists can change the world. We used to talk about all sorts of things. He asked about my father quite a bit. I mentioned my dad's assessment that at one point "Vegas was a good town for a jazz musician to make a living"... sad that he never once mentioned his own father to me who happened to have a very similar experience. I heard it second hand through people who would say "Oh, Dave Hickey's father was also a jazz musician in Vegas... I read it in his book". It would have been nice to share our respective dad jazz stories. Oddly, my relationship with him might have been strained a bit because of my relationship with author and curator Mat Gleason. He once asked my then-wife at an art opening "Is Gleason poisoning Brandvik's mind against me?" (Perhaps they were having a bit of a spat at the time?). Looking back, it all seems a bit silly. Still, Dave will always be an important mentor.

Dave talked a lot about LA. For this piece, I was asked about my thoughts on LA being an art Mecca. I'm sure it will always be. It has been forever. To me, it seemed more so 30 years ago. It was edgier, more dangerous. As one gets older, the world gets smaller, safer, and less magical. However, I still love LA. I go see art there whenever I can. I was just out to see Oasis at the Rose

Bowl. Took the metro in from Arcadia. Walked through DTP past Doc Brown's house to the stadium. Beautiful. But also my heart breaks for LA. I recently drove through Altadena and Pacific Palisades. I remember driving people through those bucolic neighborhoods many years ago. I cherish all the relationships I've made out there, especially with Mat Gleason (and his wonderful wife Leigh Salgado). I submitted slides for the Los Angeles National Juried Art Exhibition he was curating after seeing an ad in the back of an art mag (so 20th Century!), and somehow won 1st place. That's when we met and we've been friends ever since. I've been fortunate to work with him on many projects throughout Los Angeles and Las Vegas, including exhibitions at his Coagula Projects gallery at the Brewery. I was even his Coagula Magazine distributor for Vegas for a time. Ahhh, the good ol' days...

As for LVAM and its partnership with LACMA, only time will tell. LVAM tried unsuccessfully to hitch its cart to NMA in Reno. Yes we need a museum, but is this the best way to proceed? I was part of a letter writing campaign to the Las Vegas mayor years ago imploring the city to figure out an art museum. I reminded her that cities one fifth our size have one. We sort of had a nice kunsthalle at one time, albeit buried in a

west side suburb attached to a library. If memory serves, the rent was dirt cheap, if not free. But it was ultimately dissolved with little to no fanfare. This type of thing happens a lot in Vegas. The LACMA partnership seems a bit one sided. I understand the Elaine Wynn estate bequeathing of Bacon's Three Studies of Lucian Freud has a lot to do with the transaction, but perhaps we could have leveraged our hand a bit better? Wait, LACMA didn't have a Bacon painting?! Now that they have what they want, why would they continue to care about us? I'm armchair quarterbacking for sure, but locals here don't seem to love the arrangement. It doesn't seem homegrown and aspirational enough. Take the VGK. Local. Tremendous success. Las Vegas Aces (okay they moved from San Antonio, but they changed their name and overall identity). Vegas can do big things when it puts its mind to it. When it gets lazy and takes shortcuts, you get the Las Vegas Raiders, and possibly the Las Vegas A's. (At least two world class venues came out of the deal, so maybe we'll get a lovely art box?). An embarrassing amount of modern and contemporary artwork is locked up behind castle walls in Vegas. Enough to make many cities not named NYC or LA blush. I was an art handler here for years, hanging Basquiats, Warhols, Ruschas, Murakamis, Hirsts and the like in bed-

rooms, bathrooms, living rooms, dining rooms, and offices of the uber wealthy. Any one of those billionaires could write a check and build an art palace in Vegas to house those treasures, but they would rather spend it on other ventures. So, we get what we get. I hope it will be amazing.

Las Vegas does many things well, but it destroys an astonishing amount of its history. It often dissolves its institutions and erases its past. I don't accept the idea that this is something to celebrate. The number of amazing and stunning buildings, signs, and public spaces this city has destroyed is heartbreaking. However, some things have been saved and many parts of the urban core have been revitalized. There's always hope. Thanks to the efforts of Steve Evans at the City of Las Vegas (who credits my paintings for in part inspiring the discussion to save the structure), the iconic La Concha motel lobby by Paul Revere Williams was spared and repurposed for the Neon Museum. It looks like the historic Huntridge Theater in my neighborhood will be brought back to life. But don't get me started on bad stucco remodel overlays that hang on mid-mod gems like a bad suit. Or our often horrible urban planning. Or our paved-over waterways. Or our predilection for beheaded palm trees! Or that our urban core is filled with too many

blighted empty lots where interesting buildings once stood. The properties are bought and held by speculative developers that don't even spare mature landscaping, but instead turn lots into trash-strewn chain-link fenced moonscapes. Yes we have a neon museum, but we shouldn't need a neon museum. Architecture is my first love, and I've participated in many failed campaigns to save mostly mid-century buildings in this town. UNLV's Maude Frazier Hall, the first building built on campus, is but one example. I was teaching at the university when the decision was made to demolish this beautiful Zick and Sharp structure. I remember some idiot opinion columnist in the local newspaper defending the decision to tear it down because the building was "not much to look at" and "built on the cheap". It was in fact much better built than any of the stucco abominations constructed on campus in the 80s and 90s. But more importantly, it was the first. I suppose there's nothing more Vegas than for the local university to celebrate its 50th year of existence by knocking down the only 50 year old building on campus. (Compare that to my orientation tour at UNC Chapel Hill where they pointed out a non-descript building called Old East... significant because it was the first building for America's first state university, not because it was much to look at). Firsts are im-

portant. Other municipalities seem to figure out solutions, but my home town sometimes suffers from a failure of imagination. As is likely the case in most places, the people in power don't get it, and the people that get it have no power. It seems that the only one that didn't learn from Las Vegas was Las Vegas itself...

My town, much like this essay, is a rambling mess. But there's enough here to keep an artist pissed off, on their toes, and eternally optimistic.

## MARK BRANDVIK

MarkBrandvik.com

Mark Brandvik is an artist and Adjunct Professor at the College of Southern Nevada, with a previous short teaching stop at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a longer teaching stop at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He was born in Vegas and raised by a jazz musician/teacher father and a cocktail waitress/antique dealer mother. Many of his former students and teaching assistants have made a splash locally, in NYC, in LA, and beyond... many that moved away have since moved back to Vegas.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### JW CALDWELL

**Stardate 12.10.2025.8:25**

I'm about half a pack of Marlboro Silvers, & eight shots of Jim Beam in at Dino's, letting my Muslim same sex protest husband yell at me about the state of graffiti downtown and Parisian women.  
(Perhaps you should ask RasOne what it's like to be a Las Vegas artist.)

But I digress.

Regarding being a Las Vegas artist (without the quotes around it.)  
It's not about place, so much as it's about the type of character that's drawn to this place.

This place is absolutely corroded with the type of distractions that entice creatives, outsiders, & creative outsiders. And (until recently, exponentially decreasingly) more affordable than some equally picturesque & amenable climes.

This place has always been a Disneyfied version of “The Lawless Wild West.” Remnants of it still brood in the darker alleyways. Hunter S. Thompson saw the light at the end of the tunnels this town was built on. One must imagine Papa Hemmingway smiling down upon us from Mt. Charleston, shotgun in mouth. Renowned Art Critic Dave Hickey gambled away his MacArthur Genius grant money here.

It’s a place where it’s perfectly acceptable to drink, drug, & carouse until “god’s flashlight” alights. We still get to believe that the stripper might actually like us

(because, when you live here, sometimes she actually does!)

Because of, or in some cases despite, all these distractions, we make time to make art. You can sit in a dive bar between an Union Iron Worker, & a pimp, & when you tell them that you’re an “Artist,” they don’t bat an eye; you might as well proclaim yourself an Elder God from the Great Abyss.

It just doesn’t matter.

In this town, you really have the freedom to choose to be free (whatever that means to you.) And that freedom is the true allure. How you abuse it is up to you.

No one here has true aspersions about longevity; “Not Here For A Long Time; Just Here For A Good Time.”

Those that don’t take that idiom to heart?

Well, I can’t call them cowards, but

if you create work “Here” and don’t embrace “Here” to some degree?

I’ve got a wide swath of Flyover States I’ll sell ya; nickels on the dime!

I’m sure I had more to say, but I got sidetracked by folks who work in what used to be called “The Arts District” & then we just collapsed crying into each other’s shoulders.

them in the parking lots of fishing holes along the Rogue River during childhood vacations, he went on to study art in college, & was a theatrical scenic painter for several years thereafter. When he's not being a smart al-

## JW CALDWELL

[jwcaldwellart.com](http://jwcaldwellart.com)

"JW has been an artist since day one, with varying degrees of proficiency and success. After painting scenic landscapes on river rocks and selling them in the parking lots of fishing holes along the Rogue River during childhood vacations, he went on to study art in college, & was a theatrical scenic painter for several years thereafter. When he's not being a smart aleck with a paintbrush, he's been fortunate enough to have been a museum worker for over 30 years; a nice crossover. His influences are too many, disparate, & embarrassing to mention. He has a lot of small pieces in a lot of collections of varying reputation, but he's not doing well enough to quit his day job. I don't know; maybe sometimes he lacks ambition or motivation, & sometimes he just makes paintings for himself; to get the thoughts out of his head, y'know? He knows a lot about dinosaurs, & tends to ramble a bit..."

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### ZOË CAMPER

**LAS VEGAS IS** an important city. But it is misunderstood. It's been so good at marketing itself as a place where anything goes, it is sometimes hard to see it as anything else. What is it like to be an artist in this maligned city supposedly so bereft of culture and will the new LVMA be the beacon that brings the city the attention and cultural cache it really deserves?

Does Las Vegas make me question my artistic identity any more than I would question it if I were anywhere else? Having arrived from London nine years ago, the answer to that is no, I am the same person, asking the same questions. If you are committed to your practice, your sources of inspiration may change but in every other respect you can make Las Vegas your home. Las Vegas cast a spell on me, it really was a mad

leap of faith, an insatiable fascination that drew me to it. This might be a common theme with a city that is constantly evolving, has the brightest lights and a most intriguing history.

There is a slight feeling of impermanence to the city, it can feed you and your work, and it can make you more self-reliant. It forces you to look beyond the city and I think that's a good thing for an artist. There are a reasonable number of galleries, generally the international / wealthier ones are on the Strip, and the smaller independent ones are Downtown, and they are only recently starting to communicate, and they serve distinctly different audiences. There's a very well-organized library district which has a host of different exhibition spaces with a one-stop-shop application process to disseminate calls for

exhibitions, both the city and the county have gallery spaces and active exhibition calls too. Las Vegas has a low key but sustainable offering for artists in relation to bigger cities, but it does offer a career path of sorts when combined with UNLV, CSN and the Nevada Arts Council.

You can look to Las Vegas's location to understand its role in the contemporary art world and the opportunities it offers to artists. It is isolated, it is not on any 'must do' lists for art lovers, and it just isn't known for its art. You must put the work in and seek the art out. The casinos are doing a better job since City Center opened in 2009, i.e. Vegas - A scrolling words piece by Jenny Holzer, 2009 at The Vdara Uber Pickup area, and until relatively recently you could see Reclining Connected Forms (1969-74), a large Henry Moore sculpture at the entrance to the Aria City Center, admittedly it's now gone. The Aria Fine Art Collection was a fantastic discovery; it had a professional brochure and a trail to follow. Clearly it isn't enough, but it was exciting and possibly, just maybe, a sign of things to come. Art has escaped the gallery but not yet in a revolutionary way, that is still a very exciting opportunity waiting to happen, and if it can happen anywhere, it can happen here. Looking beyond Las Vegas quickly reveals an amazing heritage and one that has

fed my practice and inspiration from before I even arrived. The desert, dry lake beds, mesas, and mountains, not to mention water, or lack of, offer opportunities for artistic research and expression. As an artist you might find entirely new inspiration or themes to build into your personal practice, you can quickly be engulfed in the scale and expanse of Nevada, it is an all-pervasive powerful force in its own right. Walter De Mario's Lightning Field put New Mexico on the land art map and Michael Heizer did the same for Nevada, making me as an artist proud of my adopted state and its land art heritage that also includes Jean Tinguely, Cj Hendry, and Emily Budd. Having an art heritage to reference is important, having a sense of time and your place within it helps ground those artists who do make Las Vegas a more permanent home.

In 1963, a not so young Marcel Duchamp came to Las Vegas. He was among the many, over the last 100 years plus, who felt it necessary to venture to the American West, and to be more specific, mainly Los Angeles. He didn't think to settle in Las Vegas for the sake of his work, no, he came to have dinner with friends at the Stardust. Lots of people, including Andy Warhol, came to party but over the years an increasing number have left a more indelible, if still tempo-

rary mark on the city. Denise Scott Brown (with Robert Venturi and Steven Izenour) arrived with a group of students in 1970 to study the city and to try to make sense of its architecture. Her work had an impact on architectural classifications, she coined the terms 'The Duck' and 'The Decorated Shed', and she gave Las Vegas a place in architectural history. Frank Gehry, with the Ruvo Center for Brain Health and Paul Revere Williams with the Googie atomic-age La Concha building are also notable architectural works. The fantastical casino architecture inspires many and offers a rich seam of artistic inspiration. Las Vegas isn't short of amazing things. It has a burgeoning international reputation, but it's been hard to get anyone to stay, even the star studied Alan Yentob documentary *A Kick in the Head: The Lure of Las Vegas* wasn't enough to kick start intellectual interest in the city, or confirm it as a worthy subject, maybe a new national art gallery can.

Las Vegas is growing and moving on from its former Sin City reputation, but it might be too much to expect LVMA to add to that growth, it's also about the fabric of the city and its issues e.g. difficulties for families with children, minimal connected transportation, and so on. Until Vegas sorts those things out, like many cities, it

will be limited, and a place that continues to cater to gamblers, holidaymakers and the retired. It is likely to remain a place that the young have to leave to pursue a career.

Nevada, with a population of 3.2 million people spread over 110,000 square miles, brings vast landscapes and new perspectives in terms of contemporary and historical art heritage, it isn't London, it isn't like anywhere I know or have ever experienced before. But I feel at home here and it's not just because I am following the well-trodden path of the pioneers heading west, it's because I am also in the company of the likes of, Richard Long, David Hockney and Anthony Gormley who all came to Las Vegas from the UK. I know they didn't stay, but they left significant pieces of work for me to enjoy, they made a commitment to the city, and I feel I am doing the same thing, if on a smaller scale. It's also because Las Vegas is so much more than the casinos; it's a 24 hour city, with world class restaurants, sports, music, shows, history, oh and a speak easy disguised as an ice cream parlor. It's a place made for your imagination to run wild, it is the manifestation of what America wants when it wants to have fun. And 41M tourists came to Las Vegas in 2024 bringing in 13.5B in gambling revenue alone (Source: LVCVA), it's a

big deal.

It's an extraordinary place on the verge of getting a major art gallery, it is finally going to pull some of those artists back, it's going to be a transformative few years with all local artists and art organizations polishing their windows and getting ready to be amazing neighbors and friends, it's going to be an absolute blast and you aren't going to want to be anywhere else. Unlike Moore and many others, I am hoping to stay, this place is so unique, it is a pot of gold, it is my inspiration, from the fakeitecture to the colossal Hoover Dam and on to area 51, there is nowhere like Las Vegas Nevada.

Maybe when Dave Hickey said, on leaving UNLV, in 2010, in the Las Vegas Sun newspaper —“Improving the intellectual reach of graduates has been my task ... but they have nearly all left town. There's no intellectual critical mass here.” Maybe this time, 15 years later we will achieve an intellectual critical mass, I hope so, I am willing it so!

## ZOË CAMPER

ZoeCamper.com

Artist, RSA Fellow, ASN Co-founder, and Goldwell Open Air Museum Board Director. Currently based in Las Vegas, originally from London UK. Zoë works at the intersection of creativity and technology, her creative practice combines labor-intensive, highly detailed drawings with technology to explore storytelling, pattern making and cryptography.

## LAURA ESBENSEN

I AM A newcomer.

I was an artist before Las Vegas, with a studio, an exhibition record, and an education spanning California and Massachusetts. This is not an original story, this is the conventional story.

I am an artist. But from somewhere else.

So what does it mean to be an artist in this place? In this non-place?

I think Las Vegas is heavily reduced to the outside-looking-in. We are small pretending to be big, we are neon along a 4 mile stretch of the I-15, we are steeped in sin and misery and nothing else.

We have an edge. Literally. A city up against nothing-ness. But not nothing-ness.

The desert is something.

A non-place in not-nothingness. An in between.

I don't think I realized when I moved here how powerful that concept is. My work has long been interested in the grotesque, in amalgamation as a road to potential and hope. The joint, the connective tissue, the space between as a powerful metaphor.

The desert makes me feel small. Las Vegas makes me feel small. And that is only because it makes the world feel so big.

Las Vegas is a place of newcomers and by-gones, rises and falls. We may not have the 30-plus-year institutions like our neighboring states. We don't have the range of exhibition space, the national interest or credibility (yet).

But we have the artists. Artists are everywhere.

When I speak to my local peers, some cite this non-place in the not-nothingness as tragic. And I understand why: unstable funding, disappearing spaces, and the feeling of constantly rebuilding without institutional memory take a real toll.

I've been trying to sit with a different possibility. (And as any newcomer should, I will challenge with caution. This is a debate, not an ultimatum.)

There is immense opportunity in open space and rise and fall. No, we do not have what they have. But what we do have is an ebb and flow of interest, of capacity.

I inherited this moment rather than lived its beginning. From that inherited position, take our local biennial as an example. When the Bullfrog Biennial ended, leaving behind both momentum and loss, the Desert Biennial Project emerged.

And if we can suspend the grief, we can see that this transience is in fact opportunity. New faces. New takes. New blood. Open to all.

Being an artist here means being unapologetically available. Go make opportunity. There is space. There is interest. There are artists.

When we act with radical generosity, creating art, energy, and abundance, we can loosen some of the fears that come with scarcity. In a place defined by inheritance and reinvention, community isn't something we wait for. It's something we can activate and take responsibility for, here in this beautiful in-between.

## LAURA ESBENSEN

LauraEsbensen.com

Laura Esbensen is an artist living and working in Las Vegas, Nevada. She holds a BA in Studio Arts from the University of California, San Diego and an MFA in Fine Arts from Lesley University.

Her sculptural practice is focused on the generative power of the grotesque, creating abstract geological and biological forms in concrete and plastic. Her illustrative practice draws inspiration from the expansive space, including outer space, deep oceans, and the Mojave desert.

Esbensen's creative practice extends into community activations, including work with the Art+Everywhere Foundation, the Arts Community Coalition of Nevada, and the upcoming launch of Gallery RAG Las Vegas, an alternative exhibitions space focused on art as a *radical act of generosity*.

DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

BRETT W. SPERRY

The night here  
is different

nightfalls luminous  
and neon in particular  
desert-dry magnanimous  
impossibly large moonlit nights  
and boundless recreation

The daylight  
is different

the way it moves  
giddy delight canyon colorpop  
contrasts overwhelming  
and deep shadow darks

Desert quiet is different

breath-held quiet  
anxious & ready

the desert waits  
and listens

The visitors who visit  
and the unimaginative  
see the harsh

and those who live here?  
and those who create here?

They see...  
whatever they want to see:

inexplicable beauty  
raw commerce  
suspicious romance  
the unquestionably free  
and fleeting glimpses  
of infinite possibility

painters, poets & performers  
one and all  
influenced & altered  
by this most place of places

Stay long enough

and more than warmth seeps in:

visions  
lovers  
addictions  
stories ordinary  
& stories so strange  
no one would ever believe

you'll lose your way  
or  
epiphany  
so startling  
you're compelled to express it

Despite the seemingly empty expanse

This Desert accommodates

desert abundant & overwhelming...

it takes time  
to get good  
at making use of it all

## BRETT W. SPERRY

TheCubeLV.com

Brett W. Sperry is a multi-disciplinary artist and renowned game designer.

His art practice began with black-and-white photography in the 1980s and later expanded into the digital arts. He was a founder of Westwood Studios and the visionary designer behind several industry-defining games, including *Eye of the Beholder*, *Dune II*, and *Command & Conquer*. Sperry has received numerous awards, including the Industry Icon Award for Lifetime Achievement.

Since 2010, Sperry has shown his photographic work and immersive art installations in Las Vegas with the exploration of color, structure, and visceral experience informing the body of his work.

## ERIC STRAIN

**A SEARCH FOR** silence among chaos...

Too often our thoughts are encumbered with the fanciful, an attempt to be innovative without appreciating the beauty in the simplicity of an environment. A drive to be international without first being local. Our impatience to be seen, to be “important”, shadows the truth of how space and its intimacy affects our joy of being.

Perhaps the earth was trying to tell us something during the pandemic, a correction in our thinking, in what we value? Not only in how we live, but in the way we appreciate the impact our physical environment has on each of us, and the impact each of us has on the earth. Or will the correction simply return back to how it was? Will anything lasting be learned?

Las Vegas has always been a city of two worlds. One, admired and sought after for complete immersion into the spectacle of an alternate life. A place 40+ million tourists visit for a few days, forgetting where they came from, seeking the mythical experiences of another time or place, a momentary replacement of reality, the grandeur of living a life larger than their own. And the other world, quietly lying just below the surface or occupying the perimeter of the first, is hard edged and hostile – yet, despite its brutality, there is a beauty.

Beauty is found in the vibrant, craggy geologic formations formed by the forces of nature rather than replicated by the hand of man. It is the ancient story of wind and rock, of cloud shadows passing across barren mountains, shimmering

heat rising from the earth, and the endless sky streaked in hues of purple and orange as the unapologetic sun sinks into twilight. For those of us that are of this place, the desert is entwined in our deepest sense of self, for without the vastness of this land and sky, one fears they may cease to exist. This place, splendid and severe, is home.

It is this side of the city, this world existing in tandem with the glitter and noise of the strip, which is seldom seen by the tourist, the onlooker, the casual passerby. Hell, it is seldom appreciated even by those who increasingly call it home. Our collective focus towards progress, towards building on the desert rather than with the desert, veils its soul - the ancient silence of light and sand and sky - with the mindless, numbing homogeneity and deafening pace of our modern lives.

But it is the other side of this city that we have chosen to explore. One driven by authenticity of experience, of immersion within an untouched landscape, and of childhood forts crafted amongst the Mesquite trees. One in which relevance, permanence, community, and belonging are desired. It is in this silence of the otherwise where our work is grounded.

It sounds contradictory to say there is a silent side to Las Vegas, the city with an international reputation for debauchery. Every day, it is occupied with tourists from every continent on the planet; a city of 2.5 million people, swelling to host 40 million yearly visitors. The lights of the Las Vegas Strip shine so brightly, they are identifiable from space. The ethos and spirit of the town are broadcast worldwide by those who never step foot outside Las Vegas Boulevard's seven-mile stretch. It is because of this singular focus on the Strip, however, that one can search – in virtual isolation from outside influence – for an architecture that, at its core, strives to discover a form, material palette, and craft that connects to the specific context of this place.

I left Las Vegas in 1980, swearing to never return to this forsaken place, in search of something bigger, an opportunity to live differently. The city I left behind was 400,000 people surrounded by a vast, untapped desert. A place where, as a child, you could get lost, exploring for hours - without ever losing sight of home. The desert of my childhood was rich in mesquite trees, providing dappled shade for the pursuit of lizards and horny toads.

Despite my vow, 11 years later I reluctantly re-

turned to my hometown, based on a conversation with Ray Luchessi on the birth of a school of architecture at UNLV, there was hope that the school could have an impact on design and the larger context of Las Vegas. Within a few months I had not only moved back but had broken another promise to my younger self with the purchase of a tract home.

The city had grown; the population inhabiting the valley floor had tripled since I had made my great escape. The untouched desert of my childhood had transformed into vast developments of identical houses. As the Las Vegas Strip transformed itself into the world renowned 'Sin City', the eruptions from the new Mirage Volcano foreshadowed what was coming: a city about to explode.

Outside of the Strip, the city's growth took the form of repetitive neighborhoods of Tuscan-style stucco homes encased in block walls, strip malls on every corner, and identical schools stamped across the valley, as needed. The sameness was disorienting.

There was no sense of place, no soul to the city I once again called home. Public and private developers alike accepted stucco as the only build-

ing material of consideration. Cheap, fast, and easy to assemble, stucco allowed them to meet the growing hunger for development across the Las Vegas Valley. I questioned why I returned.

Over the next few years, while working in various local firms, I developed a new respect for the work of Mexican architect Luis Barragán. He worked in unadorned volumes, where color was the material of choice, and he was deeply passionate about the desert garden.

Barragán's gardens were not the full yards of bloom found in Salt Lake City or Los Angeles that I had left, but the deep fuchsia of a singular cactus blooming against a landscape most would regard as dull and barren. Reading about the Jardines del Pedregal sparked my desire to return to the forts built among the mesquite groves of my youth, and these childhood experiences suddenly translated into an architectural experience of space. I began to appreciate architecture and landscape as a unified design methodology, co-existing to form a process to understanding of place in the Mojave Desert.

Roger Thomas gave me the opportunity to start assemblageSTUDIO. Working as the architect of record with Mark Mack on Roger's home, the

firm was launched in 1997 on April Fool's Day – fitting, given my disregard of Roger's business advice of, "If you are going to start a firm, do it in LA or New York. You will still get the work here [Las Vegas], but you will also get respect".

Twenty eight April Fool's Days later, and we are still pushing that rock uphill trying to prove design respect can be achieved within this city, UNLV's School of Architecture and wondering if I should have just kept driving to Phoenix those 34 some odd years ago instead of stopping here...I wonder how many more April Fools it will take until Las Vegas has the kind of design culture to sustain design?

But Las Vegas has been good to me, maybe I should give it more credit. But I can still be critical, question where we are, want more from both the city and UNLV. The potential is here for both.

For the first two years, color in plaster was our primary material. The Thomas Residence, Gardner Residence, and the Mesquite Veterinary Clinic are all modernist collages of colored plaster set against a landscape of grasses, ocotillos, and mesquite trees. The color, a backdrop for casting of shadows.

In 1999, this began to change. The commission for the Visitor's Center at the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort gave us the opportunity to evolve by giving us time to think...to consider alternatives...to instill a design approach fitting of the Mojave Desert.

The project was not due for a year, and this relaxed schedule allowed us to look back at the history of Las Vegas. More than studying the simple vernacular structures of adobe, stone, and wood, we analyzed the 'how' and 'why' the valley was settled, the importance of the Las Vegas Creek - once a lush meadowed landscape - and the early Paiute structures, reflecting their culture of mobility.

This year enabled the studio to reset and reestablish our core values. We discovered the work of Albert Frey in Palm Springs and Michael Heizer's Double Negative, and how their understanding and appreciation of place through materiality shaped their work.

We began to see appropriateness as an expression of material and craft. Materials that would age with the environment, fitting their context while maintaining their presence, and spaces that embraced the arid environment through

shading, venting, and orientation. Color was not abandoned, but it no longer was our primary material. Instead, it returned to the singular cactus blooms within an assembly of materials.

Architecture in Las Vegas has centered, almost exclusively, around the world of gaming - from the earliest motor court motel and neon sign, to the large-scale luxury resort developments of today. First seen only in the restaurants and lounges, City Center has expanded the idea of star designers creating the 'jewel-boxes' of entertainment to a much larger scale.

Today, even our public and private sectors have jumped aboard the "starchitect" bandwagon, bringing in big name designers to create the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs at UNLV and one of today's biggest name in architecture, Frank Gehry, for the Lou Ruvo Center. Stardom is on every stage in Las Vegas, and the modernistic glass box is today's Strip theme, but do any of them establish place here? Have we asked enough from the stars? Have they left a legacy to inspire or just objects on pedestals in our landscape? A desert DNA is not found within a few trips...

The glitz and glamour of the Las Vegas Strip,

which transplants imagery from Paris to Rome, Bali to New York, recreates both the familiar and the exotic - with the sole purpose of capturing the attention of the millions of tourists that frequent our city. Our local design vernacular has become one of mimicry.

At assemblageSTUDIO, we endeavor to create an authentic architectural form, representative of this specific desert environment. A sustainable architecture for Las Vegas, not as theme nor reliant on advanced technologies but on a passive approach to design, cognizant of and respectful to this place.

We believe the physical landscape of the Mojave maintains an inherent beauty of textures, stratifications, and materials, as well as protected oases of color, brought to life under the play of shadow patterns of a harsh sun and the minimal amount of rain we receive. These environmental realities can be used as inspiration for design to create a sense of place and character regionalism. The Mojave is rich in inspiration and deep in our DNA.

From the work of Michael Heizer at Double Negative and Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels, to the geological formations of Red Rock and Valley

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

of Fire, we have formed a materialist's viewpoint of the city: one in which materials are meant to last—materials physically formed from the earth and allowed to change with time.

Through the ruins at Rhyolite and early mining and agricultural settlements in the region, we have begun to understand how these materials and forms create a way to live in the Mojave Desert. The inherent understanding of mass and deep recesses to shade and screens to break down solar gain, have provided the foundation from which we have developed a modern interpretation of living in the desert today.

Local history anchors our work, rooting it in place and establishing a sense of meaning and appreciation of this specific environment.

Over the past twenty-eight years, our work has embodied this objective, resulting in site specific, environmentally responsive projects rooted in the craftsmanship of place. Landscape and architecture are ingrained in design, melding together to create a coherent idea, embracing the desert rather than imposing on it, and establishing a sense of permanence and history in an otherwise ephemeral city.

### ERIC STRAIN

AssemblageStudio.com

Eric is a designer, educator, and principal of assemblageSTUDIO in Las Vegas.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### DIANE BUSH

Months before moving to Las Vegas in 1997 for a safer climate (we are from the snow belt), all my friends insisted that Las Vegas had no artists, and we could not possibly consider moving there. “Hark!” I cried, as I waved the latest copy of ART IN AMERICA that firmly stated Las Vegas was a hot bed for art, as proven by the active UNLV art department staffed by Mary Warner, David Hickey, Catherine Angel, Bill Leaf, Jim Pink, and others. I attended all the art events and receptions, befriended the faculty, and followed many a student's career, buying their early works.

Las Vegas LOVES the “new kid on the block”, and my husband and I enjoyed that limelight for a few years -- after all, we moved across the country to contribute to the local art scene -- what's

not to love? I volunteered at every art group I could find, from lowly amateur art clubs to more the more highly regarded UNLV off shoots such as the Contemporary Arts Collective. And that is where I found my home, thanks to the encouragement and kindness of CAC officers Jim Stanford and Kathleen Nathan. The CAC brought in talented contemporary artists from all over the country and filled a very important niche that we missed having access to, back east.

My role at the CAC began as a volunteer, then it morphed into Gallery Sitter, then Secretary, then Gallery Director, and then President (twice). Sadly, I was victim of an embezzler who became gallery director when I left the CAC for a full-time job with the County....but that's another story!

Las Vegas differed from the typical east coast city I hailed from. There was no city regranting organization here, only a state agency, the Nevada Arts Council. I became a huge fan of the NAC, wooed them, attended all their events, and through a schmooze (and poetry) fest all the way up north in Ely, Nevada, I met (and impressed) some folks from the Clark County Arts and Recreation Cultural Division. That led to 19 years of working as a Cultural Supervisor and Arts Administrator. I was put in charge of Galleries and created the county's first public artist register.

The County, the Libraries, Nevada Humanities, UNLV, CSN, Nevada State College, and the City, have really been the backbone of the arts in Las Vegas. I can't say enough about all the wonderful exhibits and all the support these entities provided to me and the community. The independent galleries also made huge strides and contributions, like Renegade Propaganda, Nuwu, Clay Arts, and the Left of Center, which just improves with age. To support all those wonderful entities, I still submit work to their calls, just to support their efforts and say "thanks", NOT to add to a CV that is MUCH long!

The Arts Factory glory days have passed, when

the CAC and The Trifecta brought in amazing talent from out of state. Gone are NICA, DUST, the Brett Wesley Gallery, Priscilla Fowler Gallery, Sin City, Core Contemporary, and others who gave it their best. Wes Isbutt envisioned an Arts Factory, and a downtown arts district, and so many contributed to it. Cindy Funkhouser championed First Friday. There are just too many art heroes and she-ros to list, one could just go on and on ...and you KNOW the unsung, unpaid and underpaid volunteers are probably the most important.

Now we look forward to the new Las Vegas Museum of Art, thanks to years and years of pushing, prodding, donating, and crossed fingers.

Las Vegas has certainly given me the opportunity to work full time, be an artist, be recognized on and off, and enjoy the company of fellow creatives. I have tried to give back, encourage fellow artists, buy their work, do workshops, share knowledge, be a mensch, and (pre-Covid) just show up to local events and art spaces. Please continue to support the independent and government art entities. They need to report numbers to stay alive.

My husband and I thank this community for

welcoming us and looking happy when we finally show our faces, even if they are masked. You are our family away from family. We will always be grateful to the Las Vegas art community for giving us the connection needed to feel at home.

## DIANE BUSH

DianeBush.net

Born 1950, Buffalo NY. Trained and worked (10 years) in London, U.K. as a photographer. Work in permanent collections of the Tate, M.O.M.A., and others.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### COUPERRUSS

#### AFTER EREWHON

#### PROLOGUE

“...At the end of the 1970s, celebrated American artist and pop art pioneer Ed Ruscha painstakingly created a vast fake rock out of fibreglass, covered it in the dust of real desert rocks so that it would precisely resemble them, and playfully dubbed it *Rocky II* (it was his second attempt at creating the sculpture), in reference to the Sylvester Stallone franchise. He then drove it out into the Mojave desert and placed it, perfectly disguised, in a secret location. Its making and depositing was captured on camera by a BBC film crew, and went on to appear in a short documentary about Ruscha that aired in 1980. And yet, from that point onwards, the prolific artist

has never mentioned the installation again, and no record of it exists in his extensive catalogue of artworks...”

— Daisy Woodward, *Another Magazine*, Dec. 9, 2016

#### GENIUS LOCI

“...The idea of an isolated American painting, so popular in this country during the thirties, seems absurd to me, just as the idea of a purely American mathematics or physics would seem absurd... And in another sense, the problem doesn't exist at all; or, if it did, would solve itself: An American is an American, and his painting would naturally be qualified by the fact, whether he wills or not. But the basic problems of con-

temporary painting are independent of any one country...”

— Jackson Pollock, *Arts & Architecture* no. 61, 1944

“...I was over in Australia, and got asked, ‘Are you proud to be an American?’ I dunno. I didn’t have a lot to do with it. My parents fucked there. That’s about all...”

— Bill Hicks, *Rant in E Minor*, 1992

“...The whole of America is Zion itself from north to south...”

— Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism and the Latter Day Saints

## ARENA

“...Las Vegas is sort of like how God would do it if he had money...”

— Steve Wynn, paraphrasing American playwright George S. Kaufman

“...Las Vegas is the most extreme and allegorical of American settlements, bizarre and beautiful in its venality and in its devotion to immediate gratification, a place the tone of which is set by mobsters and call girls and ladies’ room atten-

dants with amyl nitrite poppers in their uniform pockets. Almost everyone notes that there is no ‘time’ in Las Vegas, no night and no day and no past and no future (no Las Vegas casino, however, has taken the obliteration of the ordinary time sense quite so far as Harold’s Club in Reno, which for a while issued, at odd intervals in the day and night, mimeographed ‘bulletins’ carrying news from the world outside); neither is there any logical sense of where one is. One is standing on a highway in the middle of a vast hostile desert looking at an eighty-foot sign which blinks ‘stardust’ or ‘caesar’s palace.’ Yes, but what does that explain? This geographical implausibility reinforces the sense that what happens there has no connection with ‘real’ life; Nevada cities like Reno and Carson are ranch towns, Western towns, places behind which there is some historical imperative. But Las Vegas seems to exist only in the eye of the beholder. All of which makes it an extraordinarily stimulating and interesting place, but an odd one in which to want to wear a candlelight satin Priscilla of Boston wedding dress with Chantilly lace insets, tapered sleeves, and a detachable modified train...”

— Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays*

## INTENTION

“...I pursue no objectives, no systems, no tendency; I have no program, no style, no direction. I have no time for specialized concerns, working themes, or variations that lead to mastery. I steer clear of definitions. I don’t know what I want. I am inconsistent, non-committal, passive; I like the indefinite, the boundless; I like continual uncertainty...”

— Gerhard Richter, *Notes, 1964/1965*, published in *The Daily Practice of Painting*

“...We have art in order not to die of the truth...”

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

“...Outside of chess, I’m very occupied with 30 et 40. I’ve tried many systems and have lost like a novice. I’ve since gotten a bit of experience and am achieving some better results... I’m not a gambler by any means; I’m spending my afternoons in the gaming rooms and feel not the slightest temptation. Whatever I lost, I lost perfectly willingly and haven’t yet been smitten with gaming room ‘fever.’ I find this whole way of life very entertaining, and I’ll explain one of my systems to you when I get back... I really need the last 2000 [Francs] that you owe me...”

— Marcel Duchamp, correspondence with

“...In truth, I like nearly everything [about Las Vegas] except the traffic and the unctuous air of social concern exuding from the junketing culturati whom I encounter on a regular basis...”

— Dave Hickey, *Frieze Magazine*, Jan 2000

“...Las Vegas takes what in other American towns is but a quixotic inflammation of the senses for some poor salary mule in the brief interval between the flagstone Rambler and the automatic elevator downtown and magnifies it, foliates it, embellishes it into an institution. For example, Las Vegas is the only town in the world whose skyline is made up neither of buildings, like New York, nor of trees, like Wilbraham, Massachusetts, but signs. One can look at Las Vegas from a mile away on Route 91 and see no buildings, no trees, only signs. But such signs! They tower. They revolve, they oscillate, they soar in shapes before which the existing vocabulary of art history is helpless...”

— Tom Wolfe, *Esquire Magazine*, 1964

“... The Old Vegas is gone. It's not that it's necessarily better or worse; it's just totally different...”

— Bill Medley, one half of *The Righteous Brothers*

Jacques Doucet, March 31, 1924

“...It’s work; the most important thing is work...”  
— Andy Warhol, via Lou Reed and John Cale,  
Songs for *Drella*, 1990

“...The Wellington Poet Eileen Duggan wrote [a poem] that really resonated with me. The poet walks up through Roseneath to the top of Mt. Victoria. She looks out across Wellington Harbour, and in her mind she imagines something. She imagines Icarus — that brave man who, with wings made out of plasticine or something, tries to fly across the heavens. He sets off. As she sits there, she muses, ‘What would happen if there was an Icarus here, and he took off. He flew and then suddenly — like that great painting of Pieter Bruegel — he falls into the sea... Would anyone notice? Would anyone hear the splash? Would anyone see that fatal descent from the heavens? Would anyone hear? Does anyone care?’ Powerful imagery for me, and I remember that poem resonated for me... the fate of the artist, perhaps the fate of the poet — as an isolated member of the community...”

— Peter McLeavey, *The Man in the Hat*, 2009

“...Identity is your own worst enemy...”  
— Manuel Ocampo, *God Is My Co-Pilot*, 1999

“...There is always a strange assumption that art should be understood. I mean the assumption that art should be made clear. For whom? Someone once said, speaking about the public, that if a violinist came on the concert stage and played his violin as if to imitate the sound of a train coming into the station, everyone would applaud. But if he played a sonata, only the initiated would applaud. What a miserable alternative. The implication is that in the first case the medium is used to imitate something else, and in the latter, as they say, something pure or abstract. But isn't it so that the sonata is, above all, an image? An image of what? We don't know, which is why we continue listening to it...”

— Philip Guston, “It Is,” *A Magazine for Abstract Art*, No. 5, Spring 1960

## EPILOGUE

“...So it’s out there in the Mojave desert somewhere, but I’m not going to say where...”

— Ed Ruscha, commenting on his hidden artwork *Rocky II*

## COUPERRUSS

CouperRuss.com

CouperRuss, founded in 2011 by artists Matthew Couper and JK Russ, is a Las Vegas-based practice dedicated to the cultivation and elevation of contemporary visual culture. Working across art production, curation, writing, installation, exhibitions, and consulting.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### SEAN SLATTERY

**AN UNEXPECTED EMAIL** asked me to reflect on the “Las Vegas artist.” In all my twenty-four years in Las Vegas, the term has irked me, like poor stitching inscribing your skin. So, I have no answer to what makes one a Las Vegas artist today, but I have some questions.

Does the label describe someone who mines the Strip and Downtown for visual inspiration, creating formalist mimicry? That trend hit its peak in the 1990s. It’s already in a third generation. Most of those first-generation formalists were transplants; most have left. This art, while often great, is reactionary; it can be visually stunning but rarely offers new information. Maybe someone can be a Las Vegas architect or designer, making work that simply doesn’t happen outside this city. But the formalist art that happens here

doesn’t necessarily originate here. Except for a few unique sources, it’s the same as art that arises from our mid-mod past that is made in Los Angeles or Palm Springs.

Does it apply to one who engages with the conceptual elements of Las Vegas history? The first known inhabitants, Bugsy and the Rat Pack and showgirls, whatever the 80s were here. Anyone with access to the UNLV Special Collections digital repository can do that. A lack of Las Vegas residency does not disqualify one from such a project. Which leads to the question: Can someone in Cleveland with a web browser also be a “Las Vegas artist?”

Rock band The Killers, to great success, consciously chose this city as their content. But

does Las Vegas fundamentally shape my experience of Slaughter, another popular “Las Vegas band?” Plenty of musicians fly in for videos and seem to describe Downtown life well. Hootie and the Blowfish’s video for “Sad Caper” might be as emotionally accurate as the movie “Leaving Las Vegas,” and more accurate than even The Killers’ “Shot at the Night.” But spoiler: people behave badly at 3 a.m. in other cities, too. We just have better settings than most.

Leaving the Strip, does it refer to artists confronting the expanse of the Mojave Desert? Peacefully conveying the beauty of the Great Basin? Or exploring the numerous facets of the American Southwest? In those categories, Las Vegas is a prom night pimple, an uninvited intrusion. Calling that person a “Las Vegas artist” should induce hives.

Does the label imply a belief in unseen cosmic forces that exercise their will on unsuspecting inhabitants? Forces unique to this valley, different from those on the other side of Mount Charleston? Do these forces respect our political boundaries? Do they conjure the specter of having to define the Henderson artist, the North Las Vegas artist, the unincorporated Clark County artist?

Does the label apply to someone born in Vegas? Ascribing qualities to the vagaries of birth always seems lazy, uncouth, and dangerous. In a city that benefits from national and international immigration, the requirement to have been born here is gatekeeping (at the very least). Being born somewhere doesn’t impart a person with special knowledge that is inaccessible to others. I was born in southern Virginia but was shuttled to Germany within the year. Ask me about being a Virginian artist....

Does the label apply to someone working in Vegas? Sure. But what does introducing an artist as a “Las Vegas artist” do but define them as provincial to anyone living in a city with more than three million people? The label exhibits narcissism. It implies that others should know the qualities that make one a Las Vegas artist. I feel no shame in admitting that being introduced to someone as a “Twin Cities artist” would tell me nothing about them other than they probably have heard more Prince than me. But can I infer their opinions on minimalism or maximalism or the snow? Ditto Atlanta, Boston, Charleston, Denver, etc.

Is the world today even this hyperlocal, as the label implies? Maybe it meant something to be

a Parisian artist in the 19th century, but it seems too small now. News comes to us from all over. I barely know anyone who subscribes to the *Las Vegas Review Journal* (I’m on Sunday delivery only).

Living here, in the jail of the mountains, escapable only by going up and over, or straight through, in a few select places, is unlike almost anywhere else. A row of over-scaled, glowing buildings is always in view, some of them shockingly strange (though not enough of them anymore). The city is hostile to pedestrians; you experience the city at an unnatural speed. These features (and bugs) of Las Vegas must affect the artist living here.

Perhaps. But to the core of an artist’s work? To the point where all their content and form can confidently be reduced to the sawtooth horizon or the neon hum (now simply the silent LED)? Do critics look at the work of an artist from Manhattan and ask how the Statue of Liberty plays into this? Do they consider the psychic effects of living in proximity to both the Chrysler and the Empire State Buildings? New York has the mob, too. We have a history, but way fewer ghosts than other haunts. Place has at least some effect on the people inhabiting it. Still, it’s

bad armchair psychology to posit that it has an inescapable effect, an effect that deserves to be the primary introductory descriptor for an artist, with their permission or without.

I understand in a world of art fairs and biennials, we need labels to make artists seem exotic to the potential collectors of their work. “And get this, they are a *Las Vegas artist*. Isn’t that just *wild?!?*” But I see no valuable application of the term here, in this fabulous city, full of incredible artists. Let’s be artists who eschew unhelpful labels, labels that place stereotyped preconceptions and erroneous expectations on our art. When pressed to be a Las Vegas artist, let’s be artists *who live in Las Vegas*.

## SEAN SLATTERY

TheFailureStore.com

Sean Slattery is the Associate Professor in Residence, Painting & Design at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He is formerly a Bann artist, a Denton artist, and a Dallas artist. He is currently a Las Vegas artist.

DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

MICHELLE GRAVES

"The Alignment of the Gears"

Preface: An associative word writing practice.

Expansion

Jupiter

Sound Waves

Electromagnetic

Mining

Desert

Bullfrog

Rhyolite

Goldwell

Albert Szukalski

Belgium

Antwerp

Travel

Lost

Maps

Direction

Path

Intention

Relationships

Energy

Focus

Write

Tangent

Keep Going

Project(s)

Deadline

Time

To do

Too much

Inward

Reflect

Sit Down

Manage  
 Troubleshoot  
 Listen  
 Strategize  
 #gitrdun

As I sit down to write with my favorite pen in my beloved sketchbook—one that does not receive enough attention—I am grateful for an excuse to contemplate and reflect on my recent experiences living in Las Vegas as an artist with leadership tendencies. I am thankful for the pinball-like inertia of my trajectory, energized by the Las Vegas-based artists, friends, and entrepreneurs I have met over the last five years. In my relatively short time here (perhaps long, by Vegas standards, given the city's transient nature), I have observed. I have observed the dynamics, desires, potentials, emotions, resistances, and curiosities.

I initially asked myself what existed in the Las Vegas art scene before my time, before the pandemic? What purpose have artists found in this anomaly of a tourist desert valley town, stretching only a short distance from mountain to mountain in every direction? At first disjointed, it now seems the gears that drive the local creative essence and the congruence of its communities are beginning to align. I am excited,

hopeful and curious.

Visions of the near future have been entering my thoughts more frequently. The people with whom I will engage in philosophical conversations about creativity and business are becoming clearer. The tectonic plates of the Las Vegas arts district in particular are shifting, making this moment in time significant to acknowledge. The creative scene is definitely driving the most eruptive transformation in the current composition of the city, and in doing so, is actively rewriting the definition of the “Las Vegas Artist.” This definition is seemingly more expansive than reflective. And even those who come and go with the Las Vegas tourist/transient nature, will absorb and carry its creative nature to their next destination.

I feel myself becoming more grounded within the Las Vegas creative community, and I hope I have become a sturdy shoulder to lean on for those who helped build and maintain the arts district machine. I see once-separate communities beginning to communicate with one another as well as resisting resistance itself—an evolution that will only allow the machine to run more efficiently. I sense a quantum-level potential emerging, one that dissolves this resistance and ele-

vates change, bringing our community to higher frequencies of function and connection.

I believe this evolution will require a vast series of experiments. What works? What evolves? What influences, and what is influenced? What instills a sense of awe in the onlooker and the maker? What causes pause—allowing for a deep breath that activates the parasympathetic nervous system and sparks the calm realization that consciousness itself is magical? My goal is to embody this and encourage those around me to keep going...we will find successes.

As a member of the Las Vegas creative community, I am working to facilitate destinations, both near and far, that conjure this sense of awe. Let us wonder freely. Let us walk physically. Let us take the time to observe, allow associative thoughts to guide us through past experiences, and return full circle to the moment when we remember we are conscious and observing. This movement from stagnancy may become motivation to face a lingering challenge, an epiphanic moment changing one's perspective, or it may simply be a fleeting spark of happiness that justifies the effort given.

## MICHELLE GRAVES

GravesMichelle.com

Michelle Graves is an interdisciplinary artist who creates a variety of visual work, which is influenced by natural sciences, empirical research and existential thought.

Graves has been exhibiting artwork consistently since childhood in the United States, as well as London and Tokyo in recent years. She has a BFA in Photography from Indiana University (2003) and an MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts and Media from Columbia College Chicago (2012.) Graves resided in Chicago from 2004 - 2021 then relocated to Las Vegas. She is currently the President of non-profit Goldwell Open Air Museum, Manager of the art/resale shop Barter Beer + Mall, the Art Coordinator for ReBAR and the upcoming Arty's Steakhouse in Las Vegas. She is also the Design Director/ Art and Adobe Instructor for Denver Ad School.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### MICHAEL K. STARK

**IN POST-COVID** America, I believe that Las Vegas has become the new Greenwich Village of our time. Main Street in the Arts District is the new Melrose Avenue of America. The Arts District has exploded in popularity, almost to the same level as the new sports teams have in Las Vegas. The people behind the rebirth of this neighborhood will be written about in the years to come. In the meantime, the area has become a major tourist magnet in its own right.

For a city that is constantly re-inventing itself, Las Vegas has become the most futuristic town in America. To keep the tourists coming, new attractions are constantly being dreamt up, and added. The millions of visitors each year converging on this beautiful desert landscape creates a powerful vortex of energy and innovation.

This same amazing essence has sparked a renaissance for creatives.

Given how new Las Vegas is, there is still a sense that you can make history happen here. Las Vegas is a very young city, historically. Although founded in 1905, Las Vegas did not really get started until after World War II. Thanks to various colorful pioneers and groups, Las Vegas was transformed into a unique kind of experiment and paradise for those seeking certain kinds of fulfillment. What has blossomed since then, in my opinion, is the purest form of the American Dream still existing in the USA. The frontier mentality and libertarian spirit of Nevada is quite refreshing, and one of the reasons why creatives thrive here.

That there may not be as much opportunity left for creatives in the more expensive, older, saturated cities like NY, Chicago, and LA comes as no surprise. In Las Vegas, the cost of living is much lower. Additionally, you get the incredible influence and satisfaction of living and working inside a 24/7 cultural juggernaut called the "Entertainment Capital of the World." So much money is being spent here everyday. If you're an entrepreneur building your brand, or are active in the industry of music, comedy, art, culture, culinary and luxury goods, hospitality, gaming, sports, or "sex, drugs, and rock and roll," then where else would you want to be?

For over 20 years, on every First Friday of the month, the city of Las Vegas hosts a massive street fair showcasing artists, musicians, and crafts vendors. With so many activities happening all the time, finding your tribe and vibe is easy. I love the "small town feel" and authentic sense of community that Las Vegas embraces. Las Vegas is a place where you can attempt a second chance in your life, to evolve yourself, and make things better. My artistic journey has certainly benefited.

In the 1990's, my art was featured in 35 exhibitions. 1 show lasted for 11 years in a West LA

jazz bar. Then, for the next 25 years I ceased creating art. In 2021, with the encouragement from family and friends, I began creating art-work again. Without knowing where to start, I sketched the \$100 bill, which then soon grew into over 300 designs. I also created a series of flags and lottery tickets. The theme of the Wall of \$100's is about manifesting abundance and luck into your life.

Since my art is about money, I instinctively knew that the Wall of \$100's had to be debuted in Vegas. After a lucky meeting with the owner and manager of Taverna Costera in the Arts District, they agreed to host my first exhibition in Las Vegas in the summer of 2022. Since that time, as of January 2026, there have been 31 Vegas venues that have exhibited the Wall of \$100's. 21 of those Vegas venues are still currently exhibiting the Wall of \$100's. As the Wall of \$100's continues to grow in Las Vegas, watch for new locations opening up on my website at: [WallOf100s.com](http://WallOf100s.com).

Anything is possible in Las Vegas. Luck is always in the air. What has happened with the Wall of \$100's is proof that you can never be too old, too late, too lost, or too ridiculous for your dream to come true in Las Vegas.

As a former unknown artist who had not created art for 25 years, I am grateful to be back at the craft. It is an honor that the Wall of \$100's gets to exist in such a wonderful exciting place like Las Vegas - and for so long.

Only in Vegas could a dream like the Wall of \$100's have gotten this far.

My time in Las Vegas continues to re-invigorate my life, and has helped me touch the impossible. I'm grateful that they still like money and dreamers in Vegas.

Viva Las Vegas!

The WallOf100s is on the Las Vegas Blvd, in the Las Vegas Arts District, in Town Square, in the City Of Las Vegas, in Henderson, all over the Las Vegas Valley, and Clark County, Southern Nevada, and now Currently in the building in the Entertainment Capital of the World.

Manifest abundance and luck into your life!

**MICHAEL K. STARK**

[WallOf100s.com](http://WallOf100s.com)

Michael K. Stark is the artist behind the Wall of \$100's. The Wall of \$100's consists of over 300 designs of the \$100 bill. Michael also created a series of flags and lottery tickets. The theme of the Wall of \$100's is about manifesting abundance and luck into your life.

DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

HILLS SNYDER

Magdalena, NM, 2026

PS: The Vegas casino in the photograph is the one favored by Dave at the time.

Hi Gordy,

I think this is a great idea and I'm glad to know that Sean Slattery is participating.

All I really know about Las Vegas artists can be summed up in the press release for a show I curated, *Live Like There's Yes Tomorrow*, an exhibition at Sala Diaz, in San Antonio in 2002 that was largely an expression of my friendship with Dave Hickey.

Looking forward to whatever outcome this project finds.

Hills Snyder

**SALA DIAZ**

517 Stieren  
San Antonio, TX 78210  
(210) 695 5132

**Live Like There's Yes Tomorrow:**  
Phil Argent, Tim Bavington, Jane Callister, Jack Hallberg, Yek  
June 28 - July 28, 2002  
Opening reception, Friday, June 28, 7 - 11 PM

This exhibition of five painters with past or present ties to Las Vegas, takes its title from the notion that risk is a necessary component of life, analogous to the gamble faced by artist, gallery and viewer alike. While the gambler is sometimes melodramatically stereotyped as "living like there's no tomorrow," Sala Diaz, with tongue firmly in cheek, invites all comers to step up to the table for the long moment, and linger.



**HILLS SNYDER**

[Linktr.ee/HillsSnyder](https://linktr.ee/HillsSnyder)

Artist, writer, musician Hills Snyder lives in Magdalena, New Mexico where he operates kind of a small array, a space in his studio for art, music, and poetry. He has written for *Glasstire*, *Artlies*, *Southwest Contemporary*, *...might be good*, and other publications, including essays for *Artpace*, *Women and Their Work*, *Museum of The Southwest*, and *516 Arts*.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### CHARLIE VEGAS JASON HUFFER

**I ARRIVE IN** Las Vegas [1999] the way most stories here begin: with a glare, a shimmer, a mirage pretending not to be one. The desert is always performing. It is the original showroom, the original proscenium, the first architect of minimalism and maximalism in the same breath. An ocean of dust. A mid-mod line drawing rendered in heat; a Dada poem written in sand and wind.

This is my habitat.

Or maybe I should say: this is where I learned to filter.

Like the flamingo, my accidental totem, my chosen kin. I survive by sifting the world. A filter feeder by design, the flamingo absorbs what it

can, strains out the rest, and becomes beautiful because of the struggle. A naturally white bird expressing its nature to become fire and fuchsia, #FF0035 to be exact. Color is not born; it is extracted. A plumage of consequence. Las Vegas understands this intimately. We become whatever we can make from the debris, the minerals, the fallout of our surroundings. We are the neon at the core, electrify us and see us shine.

Tall, awkwardly beautiful, the flamingo stands where the desert meets spectacle. A resident long before I arrived and long after the neon dims. A symbol of rebirth, or at least the cyclical burn-and-build that marks both the avian myth of the Phoenix and the architectural myth making of Las Vegas. This is a city that ignites and implodes its own landmarks, then ascends – bright-

er, sharper, more convinced of its place in the world. The skyline rewrites itself like an artist tearing up their own canvas, using the scraps for collage.

This is the craft here: implosion as technique.

To make art in Las Vegas it to negotiate the tremors of culture and history vibrating beneath the banquet carpet. Tunnels and societies of minute to minute calendars thriving in darkness under high-limit bets being placed on black in themes of Greek. Every casino is built on a palimpsest of outlaw stories, frontier illusions, atomic-daydream optimism, and the soft animal desires of people trying to reinvent themselves under a false constellation flickering “estardas” [Favi] glow. It is impossible to create anything here without also creating an echo. We absorb this city, we filter it, we refine it, until the very movement and glow that keeps us awake at night is apparent in every word, stroke, clasp of the chisel.

My work lingers in these reverberations. In the gap between myth and memory. In that mid-mod sweet spot where clean geometry meets unruly emotion. I follow the lineage of queer artists who learned that the desert welcomes its strang-

ers, even the strange among strangers. Non-binary in shape, and form, and expectation. We live like the city – shape shifting, scale shifting, and gender shifting – committed to reinvention not as performance, but as survival. We wear the armor for as long as we can, for the desert is filled with dangers. In this desert, there are plants so beautiful and so full of water and danger, that even the desert rats know not to partake of it’s drink. For the beautiful plumage is a deadly warning when you are birthed in fire. The strip glitters in all its neon genders.

The meadows have always been a frontier for the future. The Wild West never ended; it just traded horses for motorcycles, saloons for lounges, high noon for the 24-hour glow. Its stories are gambling debts and glamorous failures. Children raised by single parents cursed by their addictions that the cities’ underpinning feeds like a flower on SINdustry nights. It’s faith is a cocktail of spiritualism, science fiction, conspiracy theory, and the stubborn conviction that tomorrow will always arrive newly shined. Even the desert approves of this rebellion. It does not judge; it simply endures.

To create here is to participate in a tradition of pioneers – architects of possibility, painters of

mirage, sculptors of second chances. Double down and dive in. The artists of this city practice archaeology and prophecy at once. We paint the past in fresh colors, remixing the known histories with the lived present, placing new translucencies over old truths until the stories look like something worth beholding again. A creative process that contains a section of every community and type of people.

I build my work like a flamingo builds its color: through filtration, pressure, and patience. Through the layering of contradictions and the refusal to resolve them. Through the collision of mid-mod optimism and avant-garde irreverence. Through alternative time line histories where the story unfolds in a density dada-ist dream. One layer of my childhood, structures a narrative unfolding of cubist dream states, and dada lies. Colorful swirls in Fear and Loathing questionable chemicals, I mean. This is the gift I was given. Educated on the steps of the FDH, where Hunter was arrested supposedly. Following in the footsteps of Betty. With one mantra in all of my work. Remember B Willis. She leaves her mark on the world, and I... I will leave mine. A spray-paint circled droog eye. A de-constructed pink flamingo. Billions of impressions. You’ve seen my work and did not know. Oils mixed on

Acrylic, breath in the aerosol and see the neon color glow. When you remember me, you will see a flamingo. And wherever you see a flamingo. You will remember me. This is my palette. This is my process.

And like Vegas, I rise from what I’ve sifted. A resident of the in-between. Awkward. Tall. Beautiful because of it. A little bit desert. A little bit neon. A little bit flamingo. A little bit Phoenix. They turned me outlaw. Now I have become “they,” the destroyer of boxes.

Always rebuilding the self from the ashes of the last great idea.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### LANCE MAZMANIAN

#### Yellow Chip Vegas Labyrinth and Tall Beverage

A working person waking an hour before sunrise, arriving at a major or minor casino (Las Vegas or any other gambling town) will, if inclined to the arts, absorb unique light and vibes that roil invisible from employee halls and outside doors perhaps round the back of a big gaming outfit, maybe downtown, in an alley covered with spikes of new sun or weird glows of overcast...or they might even travel the public front entrance, right off the street, with those hired moving around ding-ding slots and cigarette tables into a corporate or private maze hidden by beefy doors or guards from former military runs, maybe ex-police...and there it begins, unlike almost all others “coming to work” throughout the world.

A creature calling itself “artist” will find razor shadow in Vegas, stuff like holiday dinners with no ingredients, mystery and money in worlds of lovely clothes and people, much of it bracketed top or low, liquor dazzled over laughter of groups in secret or blocked elite lounges, card games with bets of a single penny or a few piled with chips the cost of an average human’s US\$350K home, with a garage or two. Or three.

Vegas is a place like a cake covered in strange rainbows, black, gold, green, silver, plus many layers moving opposite or similar directions. Economics are here and there, from stupid poor to stupid billionaire, with sabre smart Homo sapiens scattered through it all. Cool odd unique people, too.

### CHARLIE VEGAS JASON HUFFER

IG: @vegasjason

Charlie Huffer is a Senior Digital Content Designer specializing in visual communications through animation and video. Alongside a robust design practice, Charlie is an accomplished fine artist, having exhibited over 14 shows in 2024 featuring large-format mixed-media works and installations. Committed to public service and fostering community, Charlie brings creativity and purpose to every endeavor.

For me, born and raised in the 60s northern piece of town... I saw it all and knew Goodfellas, kingpins, casino chefs, minor janitors, idiot managers, brilliant managers, tactical brains watching all, games in night and day and night again washed by people either few or swarming with some in the despair-side of walking earth and some so loaded with joy and passage they built castles of colored-colored chips in front of or on the tables.

With some of the chips *orange*.

Much can be learned from this kind of stuff... if you watch close and quiet. I myself came through the Vegas era between Lost In Space and Jim Cameron's TITANIC, experiencing almost casino everything. I found a Nazi war room, wise guys at dinner and private games, men and women rich through daylight exosphere or people from many nations who sometimes dropped big bits of money (US\$15K+) on the floor outside their own room...and yet other people shooting small small paychecks or meagre Social Security bucks to vapor. Time and again.

Add to it (among other things) the owner of a major iconic property who sat in front of me with his "brandy ginger" every night and nev-

er looked up even once while he signed his own name over and over and over on a paper bar napkin.

As the story goes, I could write 120,000+ words about Vegas everything. With coffee in one hand and "Van Halen I" (recorded on Sunset & Cherokee) playing via Apple Music. But I won't go there. For one, I've scribbled a bit of Vegas non-fiction already (around 25K words) and may do more while padding hundreds of Vegas "art" photos (hate that word, frankly) and non-Vegas poems and prose.

Regardless if visual or written I don't reveal name, rank, or serial number. Discretion is a deity. Positive shine? Different thing. Names okay. Positives things are a crazy chunk of my life Vegas experience, from men and women of Greenspuns to Fertittas, DiMarias and the unknowns, stellar execs of many departments...so many genuine top-caliber people of incredible business and cultural ability. I was fortunate in their echo, here and there...and however else.

And yes, all a galaxy-sized contribution to personal art genetics. Vegas, baby. Wow. Negative? Plenty. Only worth a hint; no ID.

Meanwhile, across the planet you'll find many things about the kaleidoscope Las Vegas panorama, a labyrinthine stretch of logic, oddity, vast stories and legends. Much of it influenced my personal work for decades—somehow, some way, and often a bit different from candy apples or bubbly 7-Up in a taco shell.

And on it goes, hopefully to A24 or Scott Free. Or Appian Way.

*Note: A yellow chip (sometimes gold) is worth US\$1000 on Vegas tables. Give or take.*

## LANCE MAZMANIAN

[archive.org/details/@andromeda\\_snow\\_globe](https://archive.org/details/@andromeda_snow_globe)

Word/visual author Lance Mazmanian spent untold hours employed on and off at 17+ major and minor Las Vegas hotel casinos, from '82 thru 2011. From birth Mazmanian traveled deep in the history of Vegas transformation, sometimes among executive and owner mega-talent or the wildly famous. In 2025, Mazmanian appears via London Writers' Salon, Fiction On the Web UK, Poetries In English Magazine (Los Angeles), more. Mazmanian's also a 2026 Pushcart nom, a major award in the indie world. To close, Leonard Cohen (RIP) once wanted to do a chapbook with Mazmanian. Til the Scrapbook File imploded.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### MICHAEL.PATRICK.THIEME

Am I an Architect or an Artist?

Am I an Artist or an Architect?

My artistic language and body of work are a direct extension of my architectural ideals. I am both Artist & Architect; they cannot be separated; it IS my being.

I have been creating and studying all aspects of design, architecture, and art for as long as I can remember. It is intertwined within me. It is my art; my art is me.

My work as an artist using Lines is grounded by fundamental & powerful principles that organize the Universe of nature and design; and of which I hold deeply as I study and explore

my passions whether through Art or Architecture. These concepts, in my opinion, create great Architecture and great Art:

Scale – Proportion

Mass – Void

Light – Dark

Shade – Shadow

Density – Lightness

Adjacent – Apart

Tension – Release

Control – Chaos

Bold – Pale

Complex – Simple

Monochromatic – Colorful

My creativity is the really the fusion of these Ar-

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

chitecture & Design fundamentals and as an Artist these ideas and notions have become the foundation of my artistic style.

My technique of #onelineatatime is not just a hashtag, but a nod to take the simplest architectural component, the 'Line', and transform it, study it, modify it, and explore it by pushing it into various forms of artistic expression.

As I reflect on my body of work, it becomes apparent that most of it is a result of my intrigue of repetitive brushstrokes or hand drawn marks over a surface resulting in unique patterns, geometries, and languages. I am interested in techniques and processes that create something out of nothing. These are things that I know will continue to excite me for many years to come.

This town is filled with such amazing talent and creativity, and it keeps getting better and better. I'm humbled and honored to be able to contribute a small part to this fabulousness! Las Vegas has always been known for the fluff and frills which is part of her charm, but she is not yet known widely for the amazing Art & Architecture that continues to emerge. As our city grows, matures, and expands, it is creating a new identity and becoming the Center of

the World City for everything excellent; including desert appropriate Architecture and world class Art!

### MICHAEL.PATRICK.THIEME

mptstudio.com

Hard edge artist living and working in Las Vegas uses his background in Architecture to create original works of art focused around the concept of applying Lines, individually, One at a Time over various surfaces using various materials.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### DANIEL JOSEPH CHENIN

**WHEN PEOPLE TALK** about Las Vegas, they often talk about spectacle. But when you grow up here, what you remember most is not the neon or the noise. It is the heat. It is the quiet. It is the sound of cicadas humming in the distance as the afternoon sun swallows everything in its path. Las Vegas is a place where creativity does not emerge from abundance but from response. From adapting. From finding meaning in contrast.

My earliest creative memories come from this duality. Summers were so hot that life settled into two rhythms. We were either outside jumping from pool to pool with friends, or we were indoors escaping into movies. The cinema was not entertainment. It was survival. It was atmosphere and world-building and emotion deliv-

ered through light and sound. At home, movies played in a loop. They taught me pacing. They taught me tension and release. They taught me that environments are not neutral. They shape you whether you notice or not.

At the same time, Las Vegas gave me magic. I remember sitting in a darkened room, watching something appear out of nothing. As a kid, I did not care about the trick. I cared about the feeling. I cared about that moment when the room shifted, when possibility expanded. Magic taught me that creation could feel transformative. That with intention and timing, emptiness could become experience. That lesson stayed with me long before I had language for it.

Some of my earliest lessons in seeing also came

from my grandmother. She taught me art not as technique, but as perception. She would say things like, if you want to paint a convincing ocean scene with waves crashing, look at the clouds. It is the same thing, just inverted. She taught me to recognize patterns, relationships, and structure beneath appearances. To understand that nature repeats itself if you learn how to look closely. That way of seeing became foundational. It taught me that creativity is not about decoration or novelty, but about translation and clarity.

And then there were LEGO sets scattered across my bedroom floor. They were my first design studio. LEGO taught me that creation does not arrive fully formed. It is assembled. Piece by piece. LEGO was modular, so everything aligned. Every piece had a logic. You could not force it. If something did not fit, it was wrong. From a pile of parts, entire worlds could emerge, but only through order, patience, and intention. LEGO taught me sequence, proportion, and story. To this day, architecture still feels like the grown-up expression of those childhood worlds. You start with an idea and construct experience carefully, one decision at a time.

All of those early experiences shaped how I cre-

ate work now. My process begins with subtraction. The desert taught me that. In this climate, excess is a liability. Light is unforgiving. Heat exposes every weak decision. The landscape is so powerful that architecture must earn its presence. I remove what does not belong until the idea is clear, grounded, and honest.

Once the essential idea is distilled, the work becomes additive. It is built carefully, like LEGO. Aligned. Modular. Precise. Relationships matter as much as form. Proportion matters. Edges matter. Architecture should feel composed, not arbitrary. It should feel inevitable.

Movies taught me that architecture is experienced as a story arc. You never encounter it all at once. You approach. You enter. You move through moments of compression and release. You discover light, shadow, texture, silence. Space unfolds over time, just like a film. That sequencing is where emotion lives.

And magic taught me to leave room for the unexpected. Not chaos, but surprise. The quiet moment when a space reveals something you did not anticipate. A view framed just right. A sudden volume of light. A threshold that changes how you feel. That balance between precision

and wonder is what I chase in my work.

People often ask what defines a Las Vegas artist. I resist simple definitions. Las Vegas is a place built on reinvention and contradiction. To be a creative here is to understand that identity is not fixed. It is shaped by land and culture, by memory and vision. The Mojave Desert is the great editor. It strips away everything unnecessary until only intention remains. The city teaches scale, ambition, atmosphere, and emotional charge.

I also think people underestimate how young Las Vegas really is. We are constantly compared to cities with centuries of layered culture on the East Coast, or to West Coast cities like San Francisco that have had generations to build institutions and patronage. Las Vegas is many decades behind those places, still in its early chapters. But the catalyst is here. You can feel the momentum shifting. Major sports teams, arenas, and public investment are changing how people gather and what they value. A museum of art is coming. The cultural framework is forming. Las Vegas will always be an entertainment capital, but it is becoming something more dimensional. A place where culture is not only consumed, but made, supported, and sustained.

I work across the country and internationally, but the lessons of this place remain embedded in everything I do. Las Vegas taught me sensitivity to light. It taught me the value of silence. It taught me the power of narrative. It taught me to pursue authenticity without losing wonder.

Architecture, for me, is world-building. It is storytelling in three dimensions. It is the careful alignment of structure, atmosphere, and emotion. It is subtraction and addition. Discipline and surprise. Craft and imagination.

Growing up in Las Vegas gave me a strange but powerful creative compass. Magic taught me awe. Movies taught me story. LEGO taught me structure and alignment. My grandmother taught me how to see. The desert taught me restraint. The city taught me ambition. Together, they formed the foundation of my work.

I cannot define the Las Vegas artist. But I can say that growing up here taught me that creativity is not a profession. It is a way of seeing. A way of listening. A way of building meaning from memory, light, landscape, and imagination. And sometimes, if you are lucky, a way of making something appear where nothing existed before.

## DANIEL JOSEPH CHENIN, FAIA

djc-ltd.com

Daniel Joseph Chenin, FAIA, is the founding principal of Daniel Joseph Chenin Ltd., an integrated architecture and interiors studio based in Las Vegas. His work explores immersive, emotionally resonant environments that fuse architecture, interiors, and landscape through a disciplined narrative of space, light, and material. The studio's projects span luxury residential and hospitality commissions across the U.S. and have received recognition from the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and international design awards programs. In 2025, Chenin was named among Forbes' Best in State Residential Architects. His work is widely published, including *Architectural Digest* and *Robb Report*, and has been featured in books by Beta-Plus and Phaidon.

## FRÉDÉRIC BONIN-PISSARRO

**MY NAME IS** Frédéric Bonin-Pissarro, and I long ago stopped believing that art benefits from being explained. I have no patience for pontification, for the empty performance of theory, for the fragile ego of academic authority. Art is not a thesis, it is a confession whispered to the universe. It is mystery, it is doubt, it is faith.

The city I work in, Las Vegas, was built on the ashes of a great people and a great nation. Long before the neon, before the implosions and the clichés, there were communities who carved their presence into stone. Their marks remain on the rock faces around town, petroglyphs that speak more truth than most contemporary "statements" of intent. And yet the modern city rose not from reverence but from vice. From gambling, prostitution, and the mythology

of quick fortune. You can feel that history under the pavement. Today, when Las Vegas talks about reinvention, it still circles the same orbit, exploitation dressed as innovation, profit masquerading as vision. The city may change its costume, but the script remains familiar.

And here is the truth, when I am not in the studio or the classroom, I am almost always in the desert. I spend more of my life outside the city limits than inside them, wandering the wide, burning landscape, watching color shift on rock faces, letting the silence rearrange my thinking. I am not an animal for show openings, artist gatherings, or cocktails. I love artmaking, but I detest everything built around it, the posturing, the hierarchies, the chatter about relevance. That is my curse, I suppose, to adore the act of creation

but reject the circus erected in its name.

The Las Vegas artist, as I see it, is someone who works in the tension between spectacle and sincerity, illusion and raw truth. We create in a place where nothing claims permanence, which perhaps makes our creative acts even more urgent. The sky is too wide here, the landscape too unforgiving, to paint lazily or think safely. The weather teaches you humility. The materials scorch, warp, dry too fast. Nature reminds you that there are forces bigger than taste.

When I paint, whether figures, symbols, landscapes, or abstractions, I am never trying to decode anything. I'm simply moving toward a feeling. Toward what cannot be said. My heritage connects me to a long history of artmaking, but my environment pushes me toward the unknown. Las Vegas is not Paris, or New York, or Los Angeles. It is something far more volatile, more honest in its impermanence, and that contrast makes the surrounding wilderness feel even more eternal. The desert should teach us humility, the land witnessed millions of transformations and will remain for millions of years, we are just here in passing, let's remember that and not take ourselves too seriously.

## FRÉDÉRIC BONIN-PISSARRO

FredPissarro.com

Frédéric Bonin-Pissarro is a French-American painter whose expressive, symbolic, and Neo-Impressionist lineage traces back to Camille Pissarro. Based in Las Vegas, he draws from the desert's solitude and contradictions to create works that explore identity, landscape, and faith in the act of making.

## NANCY GOOD

**WHEN ASKED IF** there's something “different” about Las Vegas artists, compared to artists in other thriving urban arts cities such as New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, I can only speak to my personal experience.

As a visual artist living and working in Las Vegas for nearly 15 years, I've spent countless hours in the company of other talented artists, at gallery or exhibition openings, art fairs, workshops, and the like. I've paid close attention to not only what influences my own work, but also the influences that show up in the work of others. I've noticed the traits many artists here have in common with those in the arts cities mentioned above, such as self-discipline and dedication to one's practice, while also noting some intriguing differences,

such as a fearlessness to blaze one's own creative trail in pursuit of genuine originality.

Working in Las Vegas means there are fewer traditional opportunities that seem to be available to artists elsewhere. To name just a few, we have far fewer privately curated gallery spaces, fewer arts nonprofits providing support and resources, a veritable dearth of art museums (except for UNLV's Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art), and a minuscule number of arts collectives.

Of the galleries we do have, the majority are governed by, well, local government, in spaces such as city-run cultural centers dotted around the valley or city/county-run library gallery spaces, or other institutional spaces at the col-

lege or university level, all of which are over-run with high quality exhibition proposals they cannot possibly support.

What this all ultimately means is that Las Vegas artists are compelled to be even more creative outside of the studio in creating their own opportunities to be seen and to support themselves. Pop-up exhibitions are the norm, as are spaces that usually double as both gallery and studio due to out-of-control rents, in addition to utilizing nontraditional spaces such as bars, coffee-, tattoo-, thrift-shops for informal installations of art that look less like an exhibition and more like décor.

With the scenarios I've described above, I believe most artists here have less time to focus solely on making art. Spending extra time hustling for scraps of support or creating ways to stay visible (relevant) means time spent in the studio must be efficient and intentional.

When we think of the West, in general, we think of hardy bands of pioneers, of fearless trail-blazers heading into the unknown. I feel that artists who choose to make Las Vegas their home also have similar traits and courage to be true to themselves and their art.

So, about that art. Maybe it's the wide open spaces. Maybe it's the neon sunsets battling neon lights for attention. Maybe it's the lack of artistic trends that bombard us from white cube spaces or the "art world" in general.

Whatever it is, Las Vegas artists, for the most part, do their own thing.

Yes, you'll see hints of Basquiat, Banksy, Haring, Picasso, Koons, or KAWS, to name just a few, in the work of some local artists, but primarily you'll see authentic and original visual story-telling and intriguing conceptual interpretations that compel conversations into what members of our species have in common with each other and how to hopefully not destroy ourselves in pursuit of individuality.

Deep dives into spirituality, philosophy, science, and tech factor prominently in not only my own work, but also in the work of many of my cohorts. Ingenious and non-traditional uses of traditional mediums mark a willingness to be uncomfortable with the unknown and the unguaranteed acceptance that so often accompanies originality or some new thought. We aren't here for outside approval. We're here for our own.

This is what I think of when I think of Las Vegas artists.

## NANCY GOOD

[NancyGoodArt.com](http://NancyGoodArt.com)

Nancy Good (b. 1961) is a contemporary conceptual artist based in Las Vegas, Nevada. Primarily known for large-scale, mural-sized paintings and hybrid analog-digital works, she maintains a disciplined studio practice where she also mentors and teaches. A frequent grant/award recipient, Good's work is regularly seen around the world in galleries or prominent private and public collections, and she is also a Signature Member (juried) of the esteemed, 136-year old National Association of Women Artists.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### DARREN JOHNSON

This interview was first published in *Art Report Today* on 15 August 2025.

*Across our grand republic, most cities, counties, burbs and burbs have an arts community, each with a unique personality and distinction. Las Vegas, with very few commercial art galleries, has a surprisingly vibrant arts ecosystem, which annually produces over 80 art shows, across 15 galleries, exhibiting 400 artists. These outrageously big numbers are distinctive, especially for a high desert outpost.*

*This success rests on the shoulders of one man, Darren Johnson. At the helm for ten years, his official title is Gallery Services Manager, but one could easily add Director or Chief Curator. He and his assistant Bee Aspinall run the entirety of the programs across the valley.*

**Art Report Today: Those numbers, your volume, is incredible. Unheard of.**

**Darren Johnson:** About ten percent are group shows. We host many solo exhibits, and we have about ten groups that regularly show with us. Clark County Artist Guild. Las Vegas Woodturners. Clay Arts Vegas. KNPR's Desert Companion. Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. Nevada Clay Guilds. Beyond us, there are other venues and community centers. The city has galleries, and the county has exhibition galleries as well.

**And you curate the rest?**

Oh, no.

*Quite modestly, Darren Johnson ponders his answers before he speaks. He doesn't have the coastal trait where conversation is an eruption. I might draw a comparison to a soft-spoken cowboy, but Johnson is from Illinois and an artist. He's thinking and, like an artist, he is always seeing and observing.*

Yeah, there are a lot of opportunities for artists here. That's the special thing about Las Vegas. You probably can't come here thinking that you're gonna get sales, but, you know, everyone has a huge opportunity for a solo exhibit.

**And here, you're getting an experience. I mean, if I was an art student at UNLV, I'd be all over your program trying to get every show I could.**

But they also have a lot of opportunity there. Right on campus. And College of Southern Nevada has several galleries.

**Universities and museums can't compete with your volume. It's a public service. You're creating this—you're allowing this experience. You know how privileged it is to be able to show your work. It's really a big moment in an artist's life. You must have stories.**

I think that there's probably been a lot more than I know about. There's a lot of little stories. This might be that person's first show, and then from there, now they've got this growing art business. Now, they're doing big public murals. Maybe they're international now.

**If 90 percent of your shows are solo shows, are quite a few of those solo debuts?**

A surprisingly low amount.

**Maybe that's to be expected. A solo debut is a rather gnarly rite of passage.**

Because most of our people have shown more than once. Most of our artists are local as well.

**And we can see their work, evolve over time, through your shows.**

*To get a line on the curator's worklife, I thought it smart to ask Michele Quinn, an art advisor and Las Vegas native with a blue-chip history and an international purview. She answered, "An exhibition curator might do one to two shows in a year. Exhibitions can take a long time to work out the details."*

**Your output is incredible.**

I ask new hires, "Who does more new shows every year?" I list the Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum, the Louvre, and then I ask, "All of the above, or our Library District?" And the answer is us.

**If you think about it, it's staggering. I know you're focused, but I hope you can really appreciate how cool this job is.**

Definitely.

**You're the glue to a beautiful community. The open opportunity. You're it.**

Yeah, I guess so. I mean, the library galleries rely on just us, like recently, when my assistant Bee Aspinall was out after an auto accident, and I was in the hospital. We're it.

**You have a management job, but you do so much more than manage. You're the reassuring voice. A counselor.**

(laughing): I'm managing, I'm managing.

**How do you do it? Are there any kind of management tricks you've developed to**

**deal with this curatorial volume?**

We have to really kind of set a good schedule for ourselves, right? We have to really work with our communications as well, which is not really my strongest suit. I'm not a big talker. I'm not, you know, giving a lot of explanations, but trying to make it clear. If there's a little problem, we just roll with it. Our goal is the same: Put on a good show, right?

**I think that's the short answer. You completely have the proper disposition to make all of this work.**

That's what I try to do.

**You're an artist. So you know exactly what your artists are dealing with. Preparing for a show, it's nerve-wracking for an artist of any stature. You're the perfect person to shepherd them through this process.**

There's a lot, of a lot, to learn for the artist, for their first show, but they get it together.

*"Las Vegas artists have the rare opportunity to exhibit in a non-commercial, educational environ-*

*ment, free to focus on self-expression and the ideas they hope to communicate with their audience.”*  
 ~ Alisha Kerlin, Executive Director, Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art

**I bet the program has had some artist successes?**

Yes. Many. Like, Chase McCurdy. He runs 33 Gallery in town.

**Tell us.**

Chase might have had some exhibits previously. But he had a solo exhibit with us at West Las Vegas because that's where he's from, the Historic Westside. And then from there, he did a show at the Barrick. [The prestigious Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art is the prime exhibition venue at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.] And then he did a big arts project for the city. And now he owns and operates 33 Gallery.

**No small achievement. Did all this evolve for him? He's doing the big steps.**

Right, right. Which I think are pretty big steps.

**A gallery is never easy. What's his primary medium?**

He has a background with photo, but now he's doing a lot of painting and sculpture.

**Fantastic. Tell us another story.**

Gig Depio has done well. Have you met him?

**Not yet.**

He's an artist. I'm pretty sure I gave him his first solo show. And then from there, he has done murals, and he has shown internationally.

**He's kind of gone through this—I don't want to say *process*...**

Building from the opportunities in Las Vegas, right? Being able to have that show.

**There's no greater gift. It's an opportunity.**

That's what I think. With any of our galleries, take a picture of your show, in that gallery, and you can really sell yourself someplace else, right? It looks good.

**It looks great. A solid line on the CV... How did you come to Las Vegas?**

So after my MFA [Master of Fine Arts degree] in Ohio, I moved my partner to Santa Clara, California. That was during the recession and I was having trouble finding much work.

And then I had a friend, in Vegas, and they said that I should come down here and try Vegas. At first, I was just getting weird gigs on Craigslist, right?

And then, just coming out of the MFA, I had a body of work and a background in the arts. I was making art, and entering jury shows, and applying for whatever kind of artist's opportunities that I saw.

I got the Nevada Arts Council Fellowship Grant that year. And I got a public arts job painting those utility boxes. Then, I did a jury show with the library. The woman, who held the position I have now, became aware of my work, and she scheduled an exhibit that toured around the city.

**So you came in as an artist and, over time, walked out as a curator.**

I began to volunteer at a place called the Contemporary Arts Center, where they were doing really good museum quality exhibits. The direc-

tor Wendy Kveck put me on the exhibition committee. It got me connected with those artists and gave me a little bit more experience.

All of that happened within that first year. Before that, I was in California, living in the Bay Area, arts and culture all around, and nothing was happening for me.

There was a lot happening in Las Vegas. It may be very hard to find the arts community, very hard to find that culture, but it is here, and, there is so much opportunity.

I took a few part-time art jobs. Then the library position fell open.

**Perfect place at the right time, I think. You've been curating for 10 years now?**

More than that. Yeah...

*In March of 2025, the annual two-day WrestleMania blew into La Vegas for the second time. The event at the Allegiant Stadium, home field of the Las Vegas Raiders, was the highest-grossing event in WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) history.*

**You have shows of all kinds and sizes. In the last year, the wrestling show was a big one for you?**

"Vs: Wrestling Art" was a unique one, because I put that together, instead of someone submitting an idea for a show. It was meant to appeal to a wider audience, you know?

**Absolutely. I like it because you probably intrigued a lot of people who would have never gone to an art exhibit.**

That's what I hope the library accomplishes. That reaching hand to pull you into the art, right? No matter what your background is, or why you're at the library, come see the art, it's yours. This is for you to experience.

It's not for you to be afraid of, or, to say that you don't understand it. You can see it, or if you can, you know, occasionally *touch* it... (Like any curator, he laughs nervously.) If you can be a part of it, then that's it, you know? You do understand it. You do get it. You. You're a part of it.

**Well-said. And, you're also saying that wrestling belongs in a gallery, which was probably an interesting idea for a lot of people.**

Maybe so. Yeah. The WWE has done so well. Those colors. That music. You know, they were smart. That's art. Like the very first WrestleMania in 1985, Andy Warhol and Liberace were there. Yeah, Art is there.

**How many artists did you have?**

Hmm, maybe around 15.

**How many artworks?**

At least 30.

**Fun! All from Vegas?**

Yeah. One guy from Los Angeles. One from Bogota. But most were local.

**Do you build-out a wrestling ring for all your shows?**

It can't be a wrestling show without wrestling. That performance factor was a major component. I knew that we could fit a ring in there. But there were a lot of legal and insurance concerns... (Laughing.)

**(laughing) Uh-oh.**

Actually, it wasn't bad. We had such a great group of artists, that it came together and came down fine as well.

*"With so many cultural offerings, programs and art exhibitions, we are showcasing our diverse local talent, and inspiring our next generation of artists."*

~ Shelley Berkley, Las Vegas Mayor, Since 2024

**And in a beautiful gesture, your program is open to all artists, not just locals.**

Absolutely. Most of our applicants are local. We don't have a budget to pay for the high cost of art shipping or anything like that. The artists have to take that on, as they do now.

Like I told you, we have a person who sent us a show from Israel right now. We have a person from Italy that we're showing, and we've had lots of artists from LA.

**How did those shows come about? They applied?**

They find us somehow. Yeah, they applied. There's not really rules of who you can show and who you can't, because of who you are, or where the artist came from. It's about the work

itself.

**Bringing things to Vegas, and presenting them, is interesting.**

We had a show from Molly Schulman, who's an LA-based artist. She did drawings and writings on these giant Post-its. I wasn't sure how people were going to take it here, you know, because it's, a little bit more, out of the box.

People ate it up. The show received lots of comments in the guest book, and big numbers at the door counters.

**Speaking of discovery, upon arriving in Vegas, the first show I stepped into was the retrospective-like Yoko Kondo Konopik exhibition at UNLV's Barrick Museum. I did not know the work of the lifelong painter. Solid, big body of blue-chip work. Studied. Never a careerist. She just focused on her canvas and painted. She is consistently growing and pushing, hidden here in Las Vegas, Nevada.**

There's a lot of that. You think you know everybody, and then you go for a studio visit, and they've got huge, impressive works. And it's a

surprise, a hidden surprise.

Maybe we don't communicate as much as we should be, or used to, or something. It's terrible when people don't get along. I think there was probably a lot of that in Las Vegas before. You can't really build an arts community that way. And it's changing.

All of us in Las Vegas, we're all connected. We reach out to each other and say, "How did you do this?", "Is this OK?" or "Have you seen this artist?" We work off of each other.

*"Today, libraries matter more than ever, not only as spaces for learning and connection, but as vital cultural anchors in our communities. We are incredibly fortunate to have a Library District that champions the arts through such a dynamic and robust gallery program. Darren Johnson, the District's curator, has been nothing short of extraordinary. His tireless dedication, creativity, and unwavering support for artists have made him a cornerstone of Las Vegas's growing arts community."*

*~ Heather Harmon, Executive Director,  
Las Vegas Museum of Art, Nevada*

*As a veteran of many arts organizations, I am quick to*

*assert that such a program can in no way be institutionalized or franchised. Graduate art degrees or managerial theories have no advantage. Great success to the mission statement can only occur organically. The director needs to possess the heart, soul and generosity of a working artist.*

*The future is full of opportunity.*

*~ Art Report Today*

## DARREN JOHNSON

[Sites.Google.com/Site/DarrenJohnsonArt/](https://sites.google.com/site/DarrenJohnsonArt/)

Darren Johnson's art-making focuses on quotidian (mis)communication, reflecting his ongoing interest in how people interact and relate to one another. Primarily a painter, he blends figurative and conceptual approaches to depict the quiet tension, humor, and significance embedded in ordinary American experiences.

A recipient of the Nevada Arts Council Artist Fellowship, Johnson has exhibited in galleries and institutions across the United States, including the Toledo Museum of Art, the University of Chicago, the Triton Museum of Art, and the Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art.

¡KATIE B FUNK!

This Thing That I Love & Other Wedged Words

Rocks move on their own, you know.  
The weathering of smaller bits,  
water wind ice and gravity  
forcing the journey along its variable path  
of digestion.

Slowly, in cold Ohio morning  
more soft lump than weathered stone,  
I go to therapy and plop out fat,  
grad-school-makes-me-cry tears.

In the belly of the library,  
my morning of introspection continues.  
I spy JUXTAPOZ MAGAZINE, issue #190  
with Ugo Rondinone's seven wondrous stacks of hue  
cutting up into a violent, Mojave blue.

We exit the plane and I  
 register how differently  
 the dry air breathes.  
 Terminals corral  
 all the coming and going  
 as flashing lights with  
 dings catatonic,  
 sing to every passerby.

Vegas is known for that  
 particularly buzzy kind of  
 polyurethane perfection,  
 where Greek meets French with  
 Spanish ocean simulacrum,  
 cheeseburgers better than sex,  
 and that's just Bellagio poolside.

But was it really all that good,  
 my sister poked years later -  
*"like...if you were in a vacuum  
 with absolutely no context,  
 would that still be your first pick?"*  
 I think it was the teetering stack  
 that did me in once and for all:

toasted bun with pearly white sesames  
 one sliced ripened ring of tomato  
 lettuce shreds wrestling hard with  
 relaxed strips of bacon that

nestled onto a pile of oozing American cheese  
 encasing charred beef and  
 somewhere tucked away, pickles zinged...

We exit the plane and I  
 register once more how differently  
 the dry air inhales and exhales.  
 But it was Burgergate 2017, you know.  
*Only resort guests allowed to dine  
 poolside and enjoy those pooly poolside things.*  
 I limp back through shiny heavy corridors,  
 a single tear streaming down my cheek as  
 my eucharistic path is fully denied its reward  
 like a hungry cliché.

Instead I gnashed apart a basket of thick onion rings,  
 bitter as a preteen.  
 I feared then  
 what I fear now that  
 my language may be trite,  
 or "in that of a remark, opinion,  
 or idea overused, abused,  
 and consequently of little import;  
*lacking originality or freshness."*

A supremely kind and patient Uber driver  
 picks us up and takes us to our destination:  
*Seven Magic Mountains*  
 there she is, quenched in a river of social media

as visitors snap their photographs  
 pulse their angles and toss  
 their skirts and dresses and shawls  
 just casually enough that we  
 might consider giving credit  
 back to the wind.

The driver stayed with us the whole time, you know.  
 And these rocks moved like  
 manufactured hoodoos with  
 trucks cranes hands and sweat  
 forcing them along a designated path  
 of stacked joy.

*Do you have a tattoo of Seven Magic Mountains?!!*  
 I sure do, but I sometimes grimace because  
 the artist messed up the boulder count,  
 there should be 33 total and I've got 35,  
 bonus worry stones, I tell myself.

I visit the work on my own:  
 the first time was with family  
 the second, a couple of friends  
 the third, someone who will be neither ever again.  
 I sit down on the hardened earth and begin to write:

*I keep thinking about how people cram + shove to  
 take photos w/ the Mona Lisa...the spectacle  
 of it more so than the art itself...*

*The boldness of people climbing them, throwing rocks  
 up onto them, messing w/ other balanced rocks nearby  
 that people created...*

*What makes something "tacky"? Is SMM tacky? Why?  
 Why not? What makes something the opposite of tacky?  
 What is the opposite of tacky? Classy? Educated? Sincere?  
 Perhaps the opposite of howling at the moon  
 whether yokel or tenured or true  
 is crawling towards the sun regardless of its shine.*

Interstate 15 runs alongside the site,  
 constant artery of even more coming and going.  
 The Skittles I bought from the 7/11 on the way here  
 crush crunch chew against my molars as I look around  
 some more and think real deep about place and temporality:  
*Did you hear that Seven Magic Mountains might move?*  
 Debuting in 2016, it was only supposed to  
 be on view for two years. It quickly became so popular  
 that the lease was extended multiple times.

A woman approaches me to my right.  
 She tells me that she took some panoramic shots  
 and that I am in them, wondering if I would like to have copies.  
 The airdrop manages to swim through desert blankness and then  
 there I am in all my chubby, seated glory,  
 notebook on my lap with my ratty brown sweater and baseball hat,  
 observing bright colors smack a blazing mid-December sky.  
 Memories cannot be recreated,

only recollected.  
Memories cannot be recreated,  
only paid a fleeting visit.  
Memories cannot be recreated,  
this much I know now.  
But knowing that  
with you we snoozed a little longer,  
and danced in the sand  
with balmy winds at our backs.  
For those wolves carved  
in marble and PhD degrees  
cannot kill what they cannot agree.  
Let you be you be river,  
and I'll take care of sea.

¡KATIE B FUNK!

[KatieBFunk.com](http://KatieBFunk.com)

¡Katie B Funk! is an internationally exhibiting artist, writer, educator, and curator based in Las Vegas, Nevada. She received her BFA from Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana in 2012, MFA from Columbus College of Art & Design in Columbus, Ohio in 2018, and a second MFA from the University of Nevada Las Vegas in 2025. Building a mercurial space in both the making and the made, her work endlessly chases the spaces that allow for static work to come alive and live work to stand still. Peering through multi-sourced lens in a cross pollinated practice, she hunts the possibilities of a tender construction through deconstruction, always making certain to leave a light on down the hall.

This poem was first published in Issue 6 of *Dry Heat*, a publication of the Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art at the UNLV, College of Fine Arts.

## JAVIER SANCHEZ

### Out of the Context of My Identification

The images we experience through different forms of visual media largely construct our judgment and imagination about other cultural groups or stereotypes. Many of these images are of mediocre quality and flawed in their historical accuracy. However, many are excellent and effective at recreating the environment and compelling issues that men and women face at different moments in their cultural context in history.

Hollywood films, television, the internet, and other forms of visual media are the means through which many of us gain our impressions of the historical, political, and cultural legacies of migration and identity. I felt the necessity

for these media platforms to be investigated in my practice. For instance, in Mexico and Latin America at large, some stereotypes are unsteady categories in the eyes of Hollywood and television viewers around the world.

An example is the famous 1950s TV sitcom *I Love Lucy*, which represents Ricky Ricardo (Desi Arnaz, a Cuban-born actor) as the typical stereotypical Latin male for consumption by American television and other populations of the world. In the United States, some viewers did not know that Ricky was Cuban, believing instead he was of Mexican descent. Because of my personal appearance or my accent, people say or make comments that I am reminiscent of Ricky. Even though Cubans and Mexicans both speak Spanish, it does not mean that their cultural back-

grounds are the same.

One entity that has carried negative connotations in Hollywood films is the representation of the Latin American *vaquero* (“cowboy” in English). In television and Hollywood cinema, the cowboy was portrayed as a fulfillment of the dreams of the American man and boy. Mass media marketed the cowboy as bold and virile, and in each Western movie, the cowboy was depicted as fulfilling the typical masculine ideal.

The cowboy destroyed all evil forces (i.e., the bad and dirty Mexicans and Native Americans), conquered the land and his enemies, possessed tireless strength and physical skills, and always found love with a beautiful woman. In Western movies, the Mexican cowboy or *vaquero* is always represented as the comical, dirty bad guy who stereotypically steals money and rapes the cowboy’s beautiful woman. In the 1950s Western sitcom *The Cisco Kid*, the Mexican hero and adventurer is played by Romanian-born American actor Duncan Renaldo, while the costar, Pancho, is played by the real Mexican American actor Leo Carrillo as the comical sidekick.

The superficiality of the cowboy’s image was the secret of his appeal. Americans idealized the

Western hero because he did all that they fantasized about but had no prospects of accomplishing. But what most people who watch these Hollywood movies and TV shows do not know is that the idealized American cowboy originated in Native American and Mexican cultures from the period between the 1500s and 1700s, after the Spanish arrived in Mexico.

Ranches were established and stocked with cattle and horses imported from Spain. Spanish landowners placed Native Americans and Mexicans on trained horses and taught them how to handle cattle. By the early 1700s, cattle ranching had spread north into what is now Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico, and even further south to Argentina. The native cowboys were called *vaqueros* (from the Spanish word *vaca*, or cow) and developed roping skills using braided rawhide “reatas” (the root word for lariat). Therefore, the original and idealized image of the cowboy is not only from American culture. The image of the cowboy, glorified and propagated across the globe by Hollywood cinema as the symbol of the great American Southwest, is an inherently fictitious colonized identity rightfully owned by the *vaqueros* of old.

In the 2011 film *Vaquero*, by Argentinean film-

maker Juan Minujin, the story of the cowboy is metaphorically transformed back into its roots. *Vaquero* is the story of Julián Lamar (played by Minujin), an Argentine actor who tries to get a part in a North American Hollywood Western that will be shot in Argentina. In one scene, alone inside his room, Julian role-plays the stereotype of the American cowboy, fluidly switching his roles of identity. Little did he know that the American filmmaker was looking for a traditional representation of an Argentine cowboy, not its Hollywood equivalent.

Juan, dressed in cowboy clothing, stands facing an open door that leads to a big window. The inside of his apartment is in total darkness; the only light seen is the light passing through the covered window. Juan Minujin is using the door as a metaphorical threshold between the outsider and the insider. By casting the actor of Julian as the double, he searches in confusion for his identity lost between the representation of the original Argentine cowboy and the Hollywood Western. The original cowboy, found in his homeland and all Latin America, has been misrepresented by the mythical Hollywood blockbuster character, making it harder for him to imitate the mock-up.

In the 1956 Western film *The Searchers*, by American director John Ford, Ethan (played by John Wayne) stands outside a door frame where the interior of the room is in total darkness; the only shining light we see comes from outside. Framed by the door is the image of the Hollywood cowboy character Ethan and the vastness of the American West.

In Thomas Elsaesser’s book *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses*, in the section *Cinema as Door-Screen and Threshold*, Elsaesser mentions that the scene of John Wayne in the doorway is the image of the mythical cowboy in Hollywood cinema. The theme of traversing and crossing a threshold implies leaving one space and entering another. Elsaesser also mentions that the film is constructed around a series of crossings and transgressions and involves a constant change of places, both literally and metaphorically, as it oscillates between familial and racial affiliation.

Comparing this to Juan Minujin in *Vaquero*, the audience is presented with a cinematic contrast. Julian, blocked by the curtains, exemplifies the lost essence of the true Argentinian cowboy who has been misrepresented by another culture. This is a clear reference to John Ford’s scene, where the threshold offers Ethan—Hollywood’s ideal

cowboy—passage, whereas Julian is blocked, unable to see beyond the screen before him. In my 2015 video installation titled “Vaquero,” which included a video projection on the wall and multiple cowboy cardboard cutouts reminiscent of classic movie advertisements displayed on the floor, I portrayed the role aesthetically and metaphorically with characteristics of the films *The Searchers* and *Vaquero*. By dressing up as a cowboy in both of my videos and shooting a prop gun at the audience, I claimed the origins of the *vaquero* entity that is lost and diluted by Hollywood cinema.

As part of the same installation, I had two TV monitors on the floor one on top of the other playing synced videos of a cowboy walking from a distance toward the camera. When the character gets closer to the camera, he confronts the viewer with the same prop gun. Like Julian in *Vaquero*, the character role-plays the Hollywood version of cowboys dueling, as if practicing for a Western movie casting. Rounding out the installation is a series of cardboard cutouts of myself dressed as a Mexican *charro*, as well as a cowboy with his hand over his gun holster, ready for a duel. By reenacting the cowboy mythology as a mock-up of reality, I created images of self-identification that simultaneously represent both the

insider and the outsider, with each idealizing the other in the search for an identity that has been lost by cultural colonization.

The misrepresentation and constructed stereotypes in Hollywood blockbusters often ignore the historical origins of the characters from which they capitalize. These characters, although iconic in the minds of moviegoers, propagate idealizations that are part fact and part fiction. These idealizations become the basis on which we judge and idealize typical stereotypes in our cultural context.

## JAVIER SANCHEZ

[Sanchezjv.wixsite.com/website](http://Sanchezjv.wixsite.com/website)

Originally from Mexico City, Mexico, Javier Sanchez is a multidisciplinary artist who lives and works in Las Vegas NV.

Sanchez’s explorations seek to decolonize aesthetics in relation to the moving image to transform and alter cultural identity depending on culture and location. In his artwork, presents the viewer with characters and mystical entities shaped and distorted by new media with pre-scripted notions that are often perpetuated by films and television.

Through the clever manipulation of cultural stereotypes, these characters sometimes played by the artist himself begin to disrupt, contort, and subvert our understanding of the indigenous stock characters often found within cinema. In Sanchez’s work, the viewer is forced into a precarious negotiation between perceptions shaped by mass media and the inherent authenticity of the artist.

Sanchez is currently teaching at Desert Pines H.S. Photography Program and at UNLV Uni-

versity of Nevada Las Vegas Department of Art. His work has been featured local and nationally and it’s been featured in the local magazines *Desert Companion* and *The Weekly* from Las Vegas NV, art magazines *Art Practical* from California Bay Area, and *Hyperallergic* from Brooklyn NY.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### ROBERT BECKMANN

**WHAT IS A Las Vegas Artist?** A Las Vegas artist might merely be one living here, but should also be one inspired by the city.

Though originally from the East Coast, I first came here over fifty years ago, in 1973.

I was an artist-in-residence for nine months with Artrain. This was a mobile museum that toured the American West that year and made its final stop in Las Vegas. My studio was a converted boxcar from a Union Pacific train, and I became a kind of “art carny,” bringing my work to thousands of patrons in communities that didn’t always have easy access to museums.

By that point, I had gone through graduate school and worked for a few years as a college art

professor in Illinois. But the academic lifestyle cramped me, and I set out to be a full-time artist.

I traveled from gig to gig and spent more and more time out west, with stints in Oregon, Colorado, and Idaho. My studios were often makeshift affairs—converted basements, bedrooms, and storage units.

When the City of Las Vegas hired me to direct its first public art project, I moved here. I set up in the back of The Photo Shop on Las Vegas Boulevard, a space that later became part of the store for the famous “Pawn Stars.”

Vegas turned out to be a great place for a working artist because the city was growing and businesses needed art. I kept receiving commissions

from casinos, museums, and public buildings, which eventually allowed me to design and build my own studio in Henderson.

I was happy to be working, whether for Bonanza High School or the Bellagio Hotel and Casino.

I've been painting every day for decades.

But I've also—like Las Vegas—stayed open to possibilities, and adapted to change.

In my youth, I was known as a sculptor. For a time, in Colorado, I worked with land art. In Henderson, I became known for murals.

I designed and built a 1,250 square foot studio. It had a fifty-foot long unobstructed wall, and I often worked with apprentices/employees to design and paint large-scale works, including a 146-foot mural of a horserace for the Las Vegas Hilton's "SuperBook."

Later the space permitted execution of six 12' x 7' murals commissioned by the Architect of the U.S. Capitol for the U.S. Botanic Gardens in Washington, D.C.

The immediate environment of Southern Ne-

vada certainly had an effect on me. One of my favorite works has been "The Body of a House," a set of large oil paintings depicting nuclear testing in Nevada in the 1950s. I finished it in 1993, after nine months of working on it every day, and it eventually toured to 18 different US museums and a variant showed in St. Petersburg, Russia.

I like to think that I was bringing Nevada to a lot of new viewers.

I'm proud of what I've accomplished here.

My artist mantra, is "Stumble Humble." Make mistakes. Be open to new possibilities.

Don't be fooled into thinking you're a genius with total control.

In short, be a "full-time" artist. Someone who never stops exploring, learning, and experiencing new things. Create and share work for others. Lose yourself.

I developed "Stumble Humble" with a friend of mine, neuro-surgeon Bohdan Chopko, who painted with me for years.

This feels like a Las Vegas Ethos to me.

...

James Joyce's novel, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," stuck with me after I left teaching art, to pursue my own meaning for making art. The last paragraph:

Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

Conscience is the key word.

Fighting against the Vietnam war, I had worked with SDS and the Black Panthers, starting a free art school in Chicago. Art became a filter for my curiosities and concerns. I could care less about celebrity or reward. But helping heal, raising environmental awareness through my own painting became more and more important.

Public mural commissions gave me opportunities to do this. When I first came to town, I directed the City's first public art project in 1974. Because I was working with students, given their skills and time constraints, most of these projects

were simply decorative. These led to projects at Nellis, the main Post Office, our area's Boy Scout headquarters, the County building department licensing bureau and many civic sites that were more engaging.

...

Was I a Las Vegas artist then? I was an artist painting in Las Vegas.

There was a very special evening with Phillip Guston, in his kitchen drinking Budweisers, that clarified the genuine artist's role for me further.

Guston, like my friend, Dave Hickey, much later, disparaged art politics and any civic boosterism and art as spectacle. He told a story of being in his studio, while the ghosts of Piero and Goya were looking over his shoulder, criticizing. He couldn't work until they left.

Then his peers showed up, talking of being "new" and the competition.

Guston really began to work when he was alone. But, he didn't make ART, until he left the room. Being in "the zone," being "present" is what it's all about. Serenity, healing, connection, discov-

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

ery, and compassion.

Forget who and what you think you are or should be.

Be here, now... Just paint. Or find a process that takes you out of Vegas.

### ROBERT BECKMANN

American artist Robert Beckmann was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1942, and grew up in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. He earned a bachelor's degree from the College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio in 1964. He went on to earn a Master of Arts and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Iowa. He taught at Northern Illinois University for four years, leaving in 1971 to pursue a career as a professional artist.

Robert Beckmann arrived in Las Vegas, Nevada in 1977 and was selected as the project artist and director of the Las Vegas Community Murals Project, the first public art project of its kind in Las Vegas. The project involved Beckmann working with local high school students to paint murals on public buildings across Las Vegas. Beckmann remained in Las Vegas while continuing his career. His work has been exhibited in museums around the world, and over 200 of his murals exist in both public and commercial spaces across the United States. He is best known for an exhibition of large-scale paintings entitled *The Body of a House*, which is permanently housed in the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, Nevada. Beckmann was awarded the Governor's Arts Award for Excellence in the Arts from the State of Nevada in 1996. As of 2020, Robert Beckmann resides in Las Vegas, Nevada.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### JAY SHIVELY

**WHEN THE LAS** Vegas artist comes to mind, I don't think of the art that decorates the casinos on the strip, nor do I envision the art that fills the personal collections of the hyper wealthy. I think of the starving artist in the community dying for a platform, homegrown talent that's Vegas to the bone, but is often overlooked in favor of big names that grab the attention of the millions of tourists that pass through annually. I'm an artist who's lived here in Las Vegas for 26 of my 29 years of age. I went to UNLV to get my Bachelor's, where I majored in art with a concentration in drawing, painting, and printmaking. I now work on the Strip as a Gallery Representative and docent. My perspective as a local comes from seeing the city grow and change as I was raised here. It also comes from my personal experience engaging with tourists

daily working at a gallery on the Strip. I started my education in St. Viator and St. Anne Catholic schools until 6th grade, later attending CCSD middle school and high schools. I witnessed art programs lose funding, and moments where I attended art classes that didn't have a teacher, only substitutes.

Counterculture, rough around the edges, motivated with big dreams, describes the local art scene. In pursuit of following creative endeavors, artists are often clouded by a cynical mind forced to face "real world" obligations. There is this notion you have growing up here as a local that pursuing art isn't a realistic field or industry to enter. I was always told the practical choice is to go where most of the funding is, which is tourism and hospitality. Because of this, many

practicing artists in the area work full time jobs while pursuing art on the side.

There's a DIY element to the local community of artists here, with an ethos of "If it doesn't exist yet, I'll make it myself." The Arts District is built and embraced by locals, allowing us to be ourselves and create a third space outside the home and school/work, a real community. Scrambled Eggs, a collective created by local artists comes to mind. They provide opportunities and spaces for local artists to platform their work. Having formal training and skill matters little in place of the unique perspective and outside-of-the-box thinking that comes from having limitations, which in turn makes us resourceful. The Vegas artist is resourceful with unconventional materials, self-taught, resilient, and multidisciplinary.

Outside the Arts District, the local Vegas artist is found in the suburban landscape, galleries within parks and recreation centers, libraries, and schools. For many within the local art community, this gives us an opportunity to reach an audience. These spaces include Winchester-Dondero Gallery, Clark County Wetlands Park, Rotunda gallery, and Nuwu Art Gallery and Community Center just to name a few. The gallery and public art calls from Clark County are for many,

including myself, the only opportunities to reach an audience within the city. I have hope that eventually the community could reach a broader tourist audience beyond the niche, small local spaces.

Las Vegas is the entertainment capital of the world, known for its live concerts, theatrical productions, and artfully decorated properties across the Strip. Resorts are adorned in works from some of the most famous artists in the world. Without art, Vegas wouldn't be what it is today. Yet, I notice there's a lack of educational institutions to localize the art/entertainment industry. Nevada ranking 49th out of 50 in education, a lack of the training it takes to develop skill immediately lessens the chance for local artists, both aspiring and professional. In return, they move elsewhere to hone their skills. This gives Las Vegas the reputation of being a transient city. The local artists making a name for themselves here often elevate their reputation after refining their skills through formal education attained outside of Las Vegas. We need to take note of institutions that focus on building the culture, schools equivalent to Julliard, Parsons, CalArts, and FIDM of the other major cities like New York City and Los Angeles which are notable for their tourism industry.

The gentrification of the Arts District speaks to the idea that more than establishing a community, monetary gain is prioritized. That doesn't mean our voices don't matter, especially when we are united as a collective to protect what we care about. The recent decision on the noise ordinance in 18b Arts District shows that the community comes together at dire times to ensure that art and culture is protected and preserved by locals. We could still generate profit for the tourist industry while actively participating in the art that makes us known globally. That's why we need to come together as a community and platform local artists as much as possible.

I don't believe we are a lost cause, I can envision Vegas developing into a place where resident artists could live fruitful lives. We just need the resources to make it happen. We need more art studios that could be of public use for alumni artists who no longer have access to studio space once they graduate. We could take an example from Los Angeles, our neighbor, which is known to be a hub for professional art industries, from entertainment to fine art, theatre, fashion, and film. With LACMA's support towards the upcoming opening of LVMA, I could see this happening in the foreseeable future as Vegas continues to flourish.

## JAY SHIVELY

[monstrance.crd.co](http://monstrance.crd.co)

Jay Shively is an interdisciplinary artist with a B.A. in Art with a concentration in drawing, painting, and printmaking. Their style is punctuated by an interest in technology, history, media culture, nostalgia and memory. They are also a gallery representative and docent on the Las Vegas Strip.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### GORDY GRUNDY

**OUR ENVIRONMENT IS** everything. From a sudden rain, to political acrimony, to an active volcano next door, environment controls and influences all aspects of human life.

To understand the Las Vegas artist, one has to look at the Las Vegas Valley. Nothing lingers much. The weather blows fast through the surrounding low-slung mountains. Historically, folks have only stayed long enough to water their people, their animals and later their machines, on the way to somewhere else. The valley is brimming with natural life, yet one has to look very close to find it.

...

In the old Hawai'i State Library, I was able to sit

at a long wooden table under a darkly vaulted ceiling and tall bright windows. I was dancing between four very big books that contained parts of everything that has ever been written about Hawai'i.

You will get the headlines of old newspapers or the first chapter of a novel. A national opinion piece warning against Hawai'i statehood. An exotic travel article from a European magazine. All of the Hawai'ian monarchy news that's fit to print. Or a racist screed. Or a theatrical flyer. Or a religious warning about naked natives flying atop the ocean waves. Everything printed from 1780 to 1900.

I can't tell you how happy I was. It was an orgy, a grand buffet of absolutely fascinating truth-

ful history. In such a wide collection of material, authorship became so obvious. Motivations were laid bare. This was an unusual experience, a contrast to the singularity of our modern internet.

As I was gliding through history, fascinated by the early island traders, I learned much about the isolated lifestyle and the mentality of the islander. After all, we are a product of our environment.

That is how I am approaching my understanding of Las Vegas and the desert dweller, or affectionately a.k.a., the desert rat. Landlocked Las Vegas has much in common with the eight Hawaiian islands, such that Las Vegas is considered the *ninth* island. The pioneering desert rat and the isolated islander truly share a mentality.

...

The sun in the Las Vegas Valley is unfiltered and raw. Cloud cover keeps on moving. At high noon, the light is oddly soft and quite beautiful. But in the piercing light of dawn and sunset, that same glow turns blindingly sharp and painfully testy.

In western lore, there is the rancher, the Indi-

an and the silver miner staring, out to the horizon, always looking for clues to their immediate future. Without protection, one's eyes hide between a very slim opening between lids.

In a desert of scarcity, charity is conditional.

In the Las Vegas desert, one keeps their cards close to the vest. I observed that, as a kid, growing up in SoCal. The ocean was just 277 miles away and my dad always had a few Vegas clients in the rotary of his business life. There were several testy casino moguls who drove him nuts, as well as a few highly dubious characters who entertained us all. And I noted, the Vegas folk all kept their cards close to their heart.

Everyone loves the easy vivid greens of a forest. The beauty in a desert landscape requires a deeper study. The camouflaged colors are muted, soft and pale.

It is interesting how the demanding environment also inspires hope and joy. Maybe that defines the elusive western pioneer spirit. What fuels the hardship?

I recently saw this during a Zoom call with a university dean. We were getting acquainted,

saying the usual polite nothings, when she lit up like a Christmas Tree and I saw someone I really wanted to know.

She enthusiastically spoke of Las Vegas in the spring, from a very studied point of view. She spoke of the warmth, of the new growth, and all of the factors that produced one amazing day. I believed every word she was saying.

I too have had a couple of those rare days, when the weather is notably perfect and Las Vegas is the most incredible place in the world. A feeling so strong, it stops you in mid-step. So vivid, we skip the habit of complaining and are forced to admit 'Today is a very beautiful day.'

She showed me a virtue that I was afraid might be missing. In granite-hard Las Vegas, we are steeled for the unpredictable worst. We open doors to strangers very slowly. And in Las Vegas, there is a very deep wellspring for awe, appreciation and art. You just have to find it.

## GORDY GRUNDY

GordyGrundy.com

Artist Gordy Grundy is the Editor-in-Chief of *Art Report Today*.

As an arts writer and columnist, he has written for *Art Report Today*, *the Los Angeles Times*, *the Huffington Post*, *the LA Weekly*, *Artillery magazine*, *ArtNews* and many others. He is author of the books *Artist's Pants* and *Blood and Paint: Essays on Art in Los Angeles*.

A native of Southern California, the artist has been influenced by sunny flights of SoCal fancy, the bold stroke and the grand gesture. Hollywood, Disney, the secrets of re-creation and the Healing Power of Pop continue to fascinate him.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### YOKO KONDO KONOPIK

*We are very excited to share a fantastic interview with the painter Yoko Kondo Konopik. There is no better way to define this Las Vegas artist. The interview with the senior museum staff and artist Diane Bush was published in the Summer 2025 issue of Dry Heat, a publication of the Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art, in celebration of the artist for her large solo show Yoko Kondo Konopik: On Canvas.*

**ALISHA KERLIN: When did you start painting?**

YOKO: Ever since I was a child, I was painting—of course, school, you know. But I started learning how to paint in 1972. In Paris. He was a professor at a university, he was a sculptor. But for side work he would try to teach. I was in Paris at that time—my husband worked in the Ameri-

can embassy—so I went to his studio. Very, very dirty. There was a huge sculpture he was working on. The students would try to help him. I started learning how to paint, and then I went out to the Seine—the river. To sketch. It was so dirty because of the dog poop. I was not very happy and it was cold and dirty. That's how I started learning how to paint. I didn't even know how to use oil paint. The teacher took us to the store for art materials. It was selling brooms and kitchen stuff.

**DIANE BUSH: A hardware store.**

YOKO: That's where they sold the paint. I didn't even go to a special art supply store at that time. But that's how I started. We went to the suburbs and took pictures. I painted from the picture,

and he said, “Never do that, because what you see with your eye and in the picture, it's different.” I remember that. That's how I learned.

But that was not what I wanted. I always wanted—that's funny, I was interested in architecture. Architectural design, that's more abstract. But I had to learn how to paint anyway.

**DIANE: Because architects have to do a lot of drawing.**

YOKO: I didn't go to school for architecture because they have an entrance examination for mathematics. I had no idea if I could pass. So I gave up, and I didn't go.

**ALISHA: When did you decide to start making abstract paintings?**

YOKO: I wanted to make them all the time. All the time. Not the regular flowers, that's not for me. I wanted to make abstracts, but I didn't know how to do it.

When I went to Japan, there was some art teaching under the art supply store near my mother's place. My mother said, “Why don't you go over there and see?” I went there and the teacher

was good with drawing. He was an art graduate. But that was not what I wanted to do. I asked the teacher, you know, I'm interested in those—I didn't say abstract or anything, but something simple. He dropped a string on the floor. Then that's what you have to—

**ALISHA: That's what you would paint. What an interesting way to find a form and a shape.**

YOKO: That was the beginning. I tried and I tried. Long afterwards, I had another chance to go to a school where they were teaching abstraction. I went to two schools, because we were moving all the time. So those two teachers...one approach was to give you the different shapes, a line or square or something, and then you make something out of it. That's the way I approach painting. The other one told you to imagine waves on the ocean and that's what you had to put on the paper. That was more difficult. Those were the different approaches of the teachers. I went to those two places for one to two years each. But always, I did what I wanted. Sometimes that wasn't what the teacher was thinking.

**ALISHA: How do you start a painting? Do you draw first?**

YOKO: I draw first. Most of the time. I draw sometimes in my dreams.

**ALISHA: You come up with your shapes, your lines, in your dreams?**

YOKO: Most of the time.

**ALISHA: Do you sketch directly on the canvas?**

YOKO: Most of the time. Sometimes I use scratch paper.

**ALISHA: Do you know what it should look like before you start?**

YOKO: I have a general idea if it will come out okay or not. But you know what, I don't know. I didn't go to a university or college for art school, or anything like that. I did it my own way. It's not really the right way. I like school, art school. I met many people who graduated university art with a master's degree. Those people and me, we're entirely different. But I learned a lot from them, you know: basic technique. I learned how to stretch canvases, all those things from those people I met. When I was in Jakarta, there was a lady who had graduated from an art school in

Arizona. She taught me a lot.

We could not buy materials. So we went to the market and bought some cotton material and stretched it ourselves. Because I could not buy canvases.

**ALISHA: Maybe that leads to this question. Can you talk about the influence of different locations? How did the cities you lived in change your work?**

YOKO: I don't think the location influenced me too much. I got ideas from books and pictures and things like that. I didn't go out very much. I didn't have anything else to do. I had to stay home and paint. So I don't think the location ... Even Paris, where I started. When I come to think about it, even at that time, my mind was always going to the abstract.

Scandinavian countries, the furniture and things like that. Those were more of an influence on me.

**ALISHA: Oh, Scandinavian design. And architecture.**

YOKO: Scandinavian colors. Scandinavia was

closer to me than any other country. I visited, but I never lived there. I thought about it.

**DIANE: Very clean design. I know you like Ellsworth Kelly. When did you discover him?**

YOKO: We had come back to the States and visited New York for a few days. I went to the Museum of Modern Art. And I found his work—not a painting. Straight like a door, but plain. A piece of door standing. It was a sculpture. But I really loved it. Really loved it. I started looking in other museums to see if I could find him. After I came here I went to Los Angeles or San Francisco—I forget—they had a big exhibition of Ellsworth Kelly. But I cannot do the same things as him, yousee? I need to do something else. His color tone is a bit different from mine. I like many painters, not only Ellsworth Kelly, but many, many other painters.

**ALISHA: Tell us about the colors you choose.**

YOKO: It depends on what I feel like. I put one color on, then according to that color, the next color is decided. Sometimes I finish completely, and then I decide to change the whole tone.

**ALISHA: And paint it over again!**

YOKO: Yeah. Again. At my gallery, that lady told me to make my paintings black and white. Even though I had bright colors, I had to change completely. That's what she wanted. It worked for her business. She's the gallerist who represented me. She said, "Las Vegas people will not be interested in your painting." And she said, "California, Palm Springs, is the place where your type of painting will be appreciated."

She carried one of my big paintings—she came to pick it up, and transported it to Palm Springs overnight. When she sold it, she brought the money to me so I didn't have to go anywhere. Can you imagine another gallery owner doing that? That's what she did for ten years. Until this COVID thing. And then she closed. But after that my husband got sick, so I couldn't paint anyway. So it worked out fine.

**DIANE: Back then, I think fewer Las Vegans were interested, but the trends have changed.**

YOKO: I guess. After that, she introduced her to me. [She indicates Diane.]

**DIANE: We knew each other anyway!**

YOKO: Before that—because I did have a show here.

**DIANE: When I was curator for Clark County, Yoko submitted work to a show that I did a call for. I immediately fell in love with—**

**ALISHA: Of course!**

**DIANE: And included it in the group show at Winchester [Cultural Center].**

YOKO: Then, of course, I did the library. There was no reaction or anything. But the person at the library wanted to do my show. It was okay, because I wasn't asking for anything more than that.

**DIANE: I think everybody's going to enjoy this show.**

YOKO: I have no confidence whether anybody will like it or not.

**ALISHA: I think your work will be a great introduction to art for people.**

YOKO: I hope I don't disappoint them. Because after all, I'm making it for fun.

**ALISHA: You do it for yourself, you said. I have another question. There's a lot of curves, like arches, and then there's a lot of triangles in your work. What is it about those shapes?**

YOKO: They attract me. I use colors that attract me too. When I see something I like, I feel that I should put it on the canvas and see how it works. That's why I cannot have a title because I never even think about titles.

**ALISHA: Some of your works do have titles.**

YOKO: That's because you cannot point to a painting and say, "That one, that one," or, "That blue one." You have to name them. That's why I started to add titles. It means nothing. That's not the theme of the painting.

**ALISHA: Some of them have letters, like the letter e or t.**

YOKO: Because of the shape. I use the shapes of letters. That's what it is.

**ALISHA: You do a lot of drawing on the painting with charcoal.**

YOKO: I love the charcoal.

**ALISHA: You draw those straight lines. Are you using a ruler?**

YOKO: I don't like rulers because they're very sharp. So I used tape. You know, Scotch tape or whatever, because otherwise I cannot just paint straight.

**ALISHA: Your edges are precise and deliberate, but they're not sharp. I love that about them. They have a soft, live edge. And then some of your drawings have check marks or dots or gestures. Your shaped canvases seem to be in the act of folding—like the ones with the triangles. Or they're spinning.**

YOKO: I wanted to create something interesting. I started with just one triangle and then I went on from there.

In the beginning, I couldn't buy the canvases, particularly large ones. At that time, my mail was military, U.S. military. They have their own

mailing system. But they have a size limit. I ordered from, I think, the state, strips of canvas within the size limit, certain lengths. I put them together and made a bigger artwork. That's when I started putting two canvases together or sometimes even four together. In the beginning, I didn't create special shapes.

I wanted a larger surface because that way, when I used colors, they would show up. I wanted to make a very large painting, but of course I couldn't carry it. If I put two together, it helped me because I could carry them separately. Even now, I want to make my paintings bigger so they will be more visible. One small canvas is not enough. Sometimes I used to use at least four or five, sometimes six. If you're a famous artist and you have assistants and everything—they help you. I envy somebody who can do that. But I never had the chance. It's too bad.

You know, one time—I don't know where the casino was? They had a motorcycle show. Outside they had a big advertisement. The shape was huge. I really liked that. I don't care for motorcycles. I like big artworks. I don't know why.

**ALISHA: Bigger than you.**

YOKO: Big impact. Even if it's just a circle. If it's too elaborate, I don't care for it. But if it has a big shape, or a big color, or something—that's what I like. If I have to choose, I will choose a plain, big artwork.

**DEANNE SOLE: Where would you exhibit it?**

YOKO: That's what I'm wondering. I know I cannot fit it in my house. I don't think about exhibiting my own work. I never even thought of doing an exhibition here.

**DIANE: The work is so strong. It has to be seen.**

YOKO: My husband never liked it, you know. He was willing to support me, he would help me. But he liked figuration. Finally, I painted for him...

**ALISHA: But you don't like that one?**

YOKO: I don't like that one.

**CHLOE BERNARDO: Wait. Who gets to decide what is hanging in the house?**

YOKO: Well, he had no choice because he didn't paint them. I chose the paintings. Then he would help me put them up. So that was okay.

**ALISHA: Do you have a favorite painting?**

YOKO: You know what? [She looks through the photos on her phone] I don't see it here. The one I really liked was— Oh. A guy from Spain. And then he had a terrible time shipping because they had to take the canvas off.

**ALISHA: So they rolled it?**

YOKO: Uh-huh. Then sent the wood part separately. In Spain, it costs a lot of money to import. So he shipped it to Switzerland. Then he went over there and picked it up. That's how he got it through customs. It was a big painting he bought. The one I liked, you know. Quite often, I don't put my name on the fronts of my paintings because I think it bothers them. I don't want to sign them. But this time, he had to take it off the stretcher bars and you would not have known who painted it. So he brought me there to put my name on it. There was another one that went to Carol Goodman's office. After that, I don't know where it went. My husband was sick and I couldn't go and pick it up. It was a

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

large one. So I just told them that I would donate. There was one other one that I really liked, but I don't see it.

[She continues checking her phone. The picture is not there.]

...

The Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art is located on the campus of the University of Nevada Las Vegas.

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### ERIK BEEHN

**FOR MOST OF** my life I tried to avoid the question of where I called home.

Home has always felt fugitive and personal for me. I spent my youth in Las Vegas, a city which can be polarizing, people either love it or hate it here. Las Vegas had an unshakeable stigma that remains present to this day. Instead of mentioning Las Vegas in conversations I claimed Chicago, where I was born but spent little of my youth as a resident.

I cringed every time I was asked what hotel I lived in, which happened more than one may expect. Surprisingly I owned that ridiculous stereotype, I did live in a hotel, a Travelodge my grandparents owned on the center strip right next to the Sands Hotel.

It wasn't normal to live on the Strip, I have never met anyone else who shared this experience of having the school bus pick me up at a hotel. It was an anomaly that added to an already bizarre upbringing. In the final semester of graduate school my advisor Jerry Saltz suggested I embrace being from Las Vegas, that Vegas was "Vegas" everywhere in the world and uniquely interesting to him despite knowing little about it. Vegas was mysterious, often experienced through exaggerated cinema and secondhand stories of tourists succumbing to unsupervised vices.

I wanted to leave the desert growing up, to escape what felt like a vast emptiness, both in space and culture. I romanticized living in Los Angeles or Chicago, places where art seemed to thrive.

Having spent much of my life in what I would describe as a dirt lot of facades constantly changing shape, I dreamed about living in an urban environment; concrete architecture weathered with age, permanent and imposing. Las Vegas is a transient city with a rotating cast of cultural contributors that often leave for opportunities elsewhere. A friend in Chicago once told me that in order to make a career in the arts I would need to go to a city that supported art as a career and Chicago was not that city, although I doubt Las Vegas was what they had in mind.

Art was an unknown growing up in Las Vegas. The art I encountered was in the hotel I grew up in. Stock photos of a mother and child holding hands on a beach beside simplified abstractions arranged as decoration to match the furniture. Art was an afterthought, forever overshadowed by gambling and entertainment, discreetly shuffled into obscurity.

There were no examples of what a career in the arts looked like or that a career in the arts was even possible. Home was a cultural wasteland that soaked up more culture than it produced, catering to entertainers often past their prime. I believe Las Vegas is a great place to be an artist, but a difficult place to make a living as an artist.

For most, home is consistent, a place one can revisit with familiarity, recalling memories around locations or architecture, but for me home was nimble, steadily reinventing itself to a point that at times made it unrecognizable. I find change to be more familiar than comfort, perhaps as a product of this environment.

The artist Robert Rauschenberg once said he is happiest when he is lost. I find myself most comfortable when I feel a sense of discomfort. The unknown allows for a sense of discovery, a learning experience that bleeds into my studio.

The studio is a place where I can be vulnerable, take risks and feel entitled to make mistakes along the way. I learn just as much about myself while in the studio as I do about the work I create there. I can't say I see myself as a Vegas Artist, or that location defines an artist or their practice, but environment certainly shapes the way I navigate the world and the influence Las Vegas has on my work is something I have come to appreciate over time.

This is the wild west, void of the infrastructures found in cities with more established art scenes. Art in Vegas lacks visibility, not invisible but also not acknowledged, it is softspoken but not silent,

a whisper of sorts. It feels like we are singing in the shower at times, nobody hears it but that allows us to operate in a way that you may not otherwise have the courage to do, to let our guard down and be vulnerable.

We may not have a contemporary art museum and galleries have come and gone but several of the resorts lining Las Vegas Blvd house incredible art collections. The experience of seeing a Hank Willis Thomas or Frank Stella in a hotel lobby is both absurd and perfectly fitting for a city that has for so long been on the periphery of high art conversations.

My first experience with art may have been watching the Volcano being built at the now closed Mirage Hotel. I watched from my apartment window in the Travelodge as it unfolded, slowly going from building materials to an outrageous replication that despite feeling out of place stood as an emblem of the city's sensational mimicry.

The city is a mirror exposing the rest of the country, actively building an identity of its own in the reflection.

I find what makes an art scene is its community.

Artists are most often the first ones to support other artists. Artist run spaces are the foundation of a growing art scene, helping to create space for conversations that foster comradery.

To most of the world, art in Vegas is regional, small and secluded, but in reality the community is vibrant and steadily expanding. The city that never sleeps, surprisingly diverse, once a sponge to popular culture is starting to contribute in a way that only Vegas can.

There are many things that inspire me as an artist residing in Las Vegas, one of which being the light, both natural and artificial. The neon that lights up the evening in contrast to the desert light, which radiates with clarity, the picturesque sunsets that feel surreal along with the perspective of being nestled in a valley where every direction faces a mountain.

Beauty is abundant in the desert. Inspiration can be found almost everywhere but the most inspiring aspect of the city I have grown to acknowledge as my home is the community. A diverse and inclusive community built around transplants and locals alike with a shared vision to create the world we want to live in. A shared purpose to fill a void that has meandered for far

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

too long; to build a platform for creativity that will outlast any of us here today.

My decision to relocate back to Las Vegas in 2018 was with specific intention to support such efforts of providing opportunities for future generations, to participate in fostering an art scene that supports art as a career.

I love living in Las Vegas, from the niche museums to the desert sky, the valley is inspiring, but the community is what allows art to thrive. Artists can make work anywhere; location is just a place to stop moving along an ongoing journey to create space and time for what we love.

### ERIK BEEHN

Instagram @thebigfrijole

Erik Beehn is an artist and educator based in Las Vegas. Beehn teaches printmaking at UNLV and is the founder of Test Site Projects, a fine art print publisher and custom frame shop. Beehn's work is a conversation between photography and painting that explores the evolution of observational painting into abstraction. His work is included in collections at the Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art, The Nevada Museum of Art, The DePaul Art Museum, The Lilley Museum of Art and The Cleveland Clinic (OH).

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

### HEATHER HARMON

#### The Gospel of Dave

Not having conventional access to art, my own transformative experiences took place intermittently until I reached adulthood. My first memories of being inexplicably moved revolve around Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*. Executed in 1969, this sculpture is the lens through which my early beliefs about art were formed.

It was not until the late 1990's, when I met art critic Dave Hickey and his wife, Libby Lumpkin, that I began to develop a relationship with what would become my life's work and purpose. Their influence on generations of students is felt so deeply in Las Vegas, a city that Dave dearly loved and often wrote about.

At the Las Vegas Museum of Art, we are developing a *Las Vegas Reader* and always include Hickey's seminal *Air Guitar* essay, "At Home in the Neon", where he muses that "America ... is a poor lens through which to view Las Vegas, while Las Vegas is a wonderful lens through which to view America."

I believe for some, Dave made a community feel seen beyond a conventional surface read. He lifted the dialogue out of the many possible cliches, which include essays that begin with long descriptions of casino carpets. Las Vegas is an image and an icon, and its story is often told by visitors who spend a weekend or journalists who quickly touch down on assignment. What remains underexplored is the beautifully complex infrastructure that guides one of the most so-

phisticated hospitality systems in the world. This system is held tightly and cared for by the many hands and hearts for whom it means home, family, work and love.

On a Monday evening in the mid 1990's, I attended an art history class at UNLV entitled *Art Since 1945*. It was the first time I laid eyes on Dave, clad in all black, wearing a black hat and casino jacket, with a large Starbucks coffee in hand. I loved his style, especially his early Mirage bomber with small, colored palm trees set against a dark background as though they were glowing in a night sky. With its leather sleeves and felted construction, it reminded me of a letterman's jacket. As he meandered through slides of colorful abstract paintings by Jasper Johns, Ed Ruscha, Jackson Pollock, and Joan Mitchell, I sat mesmerized. I could not verbalize it, but I knew then I would never be the same. The very next day, I changed my major from political science to art history, altering my trajectory.

Dave taught me how to talk about art, how to stretch the possibilities of language to describe the indescribable. He guided me to collect experiences and bring them to life through storytelling. His inclusive way of relating art to accessible subjects, from Liberace to basketball, made

space to enter a dialogue without academic prerequisites. His method is widely described as democratic.

It was in this metaphorical opening of what could be seen as a closed or a high art construct that viewers could relate to a work or a concept. Dave made space for possibility, for relationships that existed outside of a centralized art world ecosystem.

We immediately connected over Michael Heizer's work. Hickey's early 1970's *Art in America* essay on Land Art explored monumentality and the American West. At the time, he was interested in positioning this new art form as existing outside of the conventional art market. He once told me one had to "find the edge and declare it the center." For Dave, Las Vegas was that edge. For me, it was the place that most exemplified the West.

Throughout my art world journey, I held fast to Hickey and Heizer. As soon as I could, I traveled to Dia Beacon after its public opening. I went to New York in December of 2003, determined to see Heizer's masterful work *North, East, South, West*. Back then, one had to book an early, guided appointment to view the powerful geometric

shapes disappearing into a void and experience the negative space at scale in solitude. I loved being alone with the works, holding reflection and silence. At the time, it was the middle of winter and deathly cold. I had to walk from the train station to the museum, and I remember walking through mounds of snow to reach the parking lot. To keep the journey economical, I slept on the kitchen floor of a childhood friend who had a tiny apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It felt like a pilgrimage, and that was so gratifying. After the journey, I called Dave and told him everything I saw, as I often did, reporting in from around the world.

In 2009, Dave published an essay in Gary Hume's *Yardwork* catalog entitled "Will Heather be There?" I remember receiving a package from Matthew Marks Gallery with a very beautiful book inside with bright red roses contrasting against a yellow cover. In the opening paragraph, Dave speaks about the endless social events in the art world and how, when accepting invitations to events, he and Libby ask that very question, expressing that "if for some unforgivable reason Heather is not invited, we do our best to make sure she will be."

Dave and Libby were caring educators, deeply

dedicated to the growth and success of their students. They always made sure we were in rooms where we could shine. They never gave up on us, their misfit group of Las Vegas artists and writers, who gathered around them and remain loyal apostles of the gospel of Dave.

Although I followed the mystery, it was not until much later that I would experience Heizer's *City*. In the fall of 2018, Dave had the opportunity to write about Heizer and needed an assistant for his forthcoming journey. Having served this role for many years in the late 90's and early aughts, I jumped at the chance. A road trip with Dave, combined with a visit to *City*, I knew was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Without hesitation, I flew from New York to Albuquerque and from there, rented a car, collected Dave, and we began our adventure, which took us from Albuquerque to Flagstaff, Flagstaff to Vegas, Vegas to City, and back again. It was our last adventure together and one I will forever treasure. I savor every moment of that trip, the hours spent talking, listening to his unfolding stories of capers with artists, pivotal moments in art history, and how he grew up. We haunted Starbucks and listened to classic rock as he chain-smoked and reminisced.

The result was among his last works, *A City in the Ocean of Time*, where he closes by sharing, “how kind, I thought, of Michael Heizer, to have made this city for me, to have set it afloat in the wilderness, in the deep tides of geological time. May it last forever.”

Once I was back in New York City, I ran into Heizer, whom I had met briefly only once before at the Dia Foundation Gala in 2017. Honoring the late Walter DeMaria, Heizer was the keynote speaker and, after being introduced, played a John Lee Hooker song, while his beautiful border collie, Tomato Rose, howled. Once the song ended, he left the stage. I loved and felt this gesture; it reinforced a belief that language could fail to describe experience. As Jorge Luis Borges described in *The Aleph*, words cannot always adequately communicate, and some things simply must be felt or cannot be captured at all.

On this Sunday afternoon, Heizer and Tomato were on the street in Soho, and we spoke for the first time. We talked about dogs and Nevada, two subjects that remain part of our dialogue even to this day.

Dave introduced me to Borges, another of the many lifelong passions I attribute to his generous

teachings. He weaves a reference to the Argentine author in his essay about Heizer’s *City*. As I travel America, I see Dave everywhere. In cities, in works of art, in moments, and in memories. Whether it is the second-floor lecture hall in the Alta Ham Fine Arts Building, the Peppermill, Eureka, or the small shopping center on the corner of Sahara and Maryland Parkway that once housed a Mexican restaurant he loved, he shaped my Las Vegas as much as he shaped my worldview.

There are so many stories I want to share with him, but most of all, I want to tell him he was right. That he bet on culture in Las Vegas, and it is here. He won. His unyielding belief in the community and his big gamble are about to pay off.

## HEATHER HARMON

lvma.art

Heather Harmon is the Executive Director of the future Las Vegas Museum of Art and Co-Executive Director of the Triple Aught Foundation, the Nevada-based non-profit organization that governs and manages Michael Heizer’s *City*. Her deep expertise in fundraising and development stems from her former experiences as the Director of the Nevada Museum of Art and the Director of Development for Artists Space in New York. Previously, she was Director at Regen Projects in Los Angeles before joining TBA 21 to advise on institutional strategy. She also held positions with the firm KCM Fine Arts to build and manage the Lune Rouge Foundation and Art Projects Ibiza. Born in Las Vegas, she attended the University of Nevada in Las Vegas and currently sits on the Board of The Mayor’s Fund and is a member of Nevada Women’s Philanthropy.

## BY AUTHOR

Reverend Ethan Acres	5	163	Heather Harmon
Robert Beckmann	139	13	Brent Holmes
Erik Beehn	159	95	Charlie Vegas Jason Huffer
Frédéric Bonin-Pissarro	109	115	Darren Johnson
Mark Brandvik	37	151	Yoko Kondo Konopik
Diane Bush	69	99	Lance Mazmanian
JW Caldwell	45	133	Javier Sanchez
Zoë Camper	51	143	Jay Shively
Daniel Joseph Chenin	105	79	Sean Slattery
CouperRuss	73	91	Hills Snyder
Lolita Develay	33	23	Deanne Sole
Laura Esbensen	55	59	Brett W. Sperry
¡Katie B Funk!	125	87	Michael K. Stark
Nancy Good	111	63	Eric Strain
Michelle Graves	83	103	Michael.Patrick.Thieme
Gordy Grundy	147	27	Jeffrey Vallance



**ART REPORT TODAY.com**

PUBLISHING DAILY SINCE 2019

## DEFINING THE LAS VEGAS ARTIST

A Collection of 32 Essays of This Time and Place

Reverend Ethan Acres	Heather Harmon
Robert Beckmann	Brent Holmes
Erik Beehn	Charlie Huffer
Frederic Bonin-Pissaro	Darren Johnson
Mark Brandvik	Yoko Kondo Konopik
Diane Bush	Lance Mazmanian
JW Caldwell	Javier Sanchez
Zoe Camper	Jay Shively
Daniel Chenin	Sean Slattery
CouperRuss	Hills Snyder
Lolita Develay	Deanne Sole
Laura Esbensen	Brett Sperry
¡Katie B Funk!	Michael Stark
Nancy Good	Eric Strain
Michelle Graves	Michael.Patrick.Thieme
Gordy Grundy	Jeffrey Vallance

**ART REPORT TODAY**  
LAS VEGAS