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VEGAS

M A G A Z I N E

WHERE TO FIND VEGAS' BEST PUBLIC ART

By Mark Ellwood on October 29, 2014
Photography by Brad Swonetz

Beyond the flashing neon lights of the Strip, an important—and growing—collection of art lies in plain sight. You need only know where to look.



Pipe Dream by Tim Bavington at Symphony Park.

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Artists Tim Bavington and David Ryan share an unassuming studio space downtown in a sprawling former auto-body shop hunched by a railway siding that delivers ink and paper to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal's* presses. The humble surroundings bear little evidence of the extraordinary work being done inside by the two most important contemporary artists living and creating in Las Vegas today. Bavington, rangy and charming, is famed for works that visualize rock music in geometric Day-Glo stripes. Fittingly, he has the affect of a Britpop guitarist as he bounds around the loft-like studio. “Look at this—I had to make it myself,” he says, gesturing to a Rube Goldberg sort of contraption that helps him achieve the precise color bands for which he’s known. Next door, Ryan is a more reserved presence, his shyness crackling with suppressed energy and nervous smiles. He also produces color-popping abstracts, although he often works on a larger scale than Bavington, using foam and board to create hybrids of painting and sculpture. Today he’s repairing a massive piece that was damaged en route to its destination in the Middle East. Ever careful, he’s adding extra padding to the packaging for the second shipping attempt.

Both artists have works in significant collections around the world—Bavington, for example, is represented in the permanent holdings of New York’s Museum of Modern Art—but they’re still passionate about their adoptive city of Las Vegas. Bavington points to Symphony Park in the distance, which houses his 80-foot-long outdoor sculpture *Pipe Dream*. Just two years old, it’s already a favorite backdrop for souvenir selfies, he says with a laugh. The reason is simple: The work is a dazzling assembly of 128 colored steel pipes, a visualization of Aaron Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man*, with the pipes varying in size according to the dynamics of the music. To address the challenge of fading colors in the harsh desert sun, Bavington turned to an unlikely material: car paint. “This piece of art is a nod to the automotive culture from which the Strip sprung,” he says, pausing before he adds, “And my dad was a car salesman.” Ryan, meanwhile, has undertaken his most ambitious project yet. Last year the city launched a competition for artists, architects, and designers, asking them to reimagine the unloved Ogden Avenue underpass downtown. Ryan and his team, the winners of the commission, have started on the project, which relocates the sidewalks from the edge of the street to the center to create a shared walkway, while adding greenery to shield it from the wind. To brighten the underpass itself, the team is installing a swath of lights and LED screens (it is Las Vegas, after all).

Both pieces epitomize the joys and challenges of visual art in Vegas. An unpretentious openmindedness here allows creatives like Bavington and Ryan free rein to bring high-caliber

work to the masses. The difficulty, of course, is that much of it is hidden in plain sight, unassuming and overlooked (don't forget that Las Vegas managed to allow its own outpost of the Guggenheim Museum to shutter). But like Ryan's Ogden underpass or Bavington's organ-like sculpture, art in Las Vegas can be found in the most unexpected places.

Hidden Treasures Off The Strip

Take the UNLV campus. Bavington studied there, an acolyte of longtime professor Dave Hickey. The swaggering Hickey, a brilliant but prickly man, is renowned for rebelling against the art world's pseudo-intellectualism and for championing the power and value of beauty. It's the Marilyn Monroe versus Madeleine Albright position: Art that's pretty, Hickey argues with gusto, is just as important as art that's smart. The critic's legacy, other than luring creatives like Bavington to study, live, and work here, is the plethora of art spaces on UNLV's campus. The premier one is the Marjorie Barrick Museum, tucked away in one of the university's oldest buildings. The site was originally a gymnasium but was repurposed for contemporary art two years ago, after a stint displaying objects of natural history. It's now a 6,000-square-foot art museum that hosts rotating exhibitions. Another UNLV arts organization jostles with the Barrick for attention, however. Twenty-five years ago, some enthusiastic students started the Contemporary Arts Center, a space intended to showcase edgier, more experimental work by local artists. It's now staging pop-up events in situ to help raise funds for a new permanent home. Last year a group show, "Exquisite Corpse," was dedicated to works on paper.

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Peter Alexander's Sugar at the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health.

But arguably the city's most unexpected site for top-tier contemporary art is a medical facility: the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health. The twisted silver façade, designed by Frank Gehry, shades an outdoor café and garden where LA-based artist Peter Alexander's sculpture Sugar—shards of glass piled high like a rock candy pyramid—is permanently installed. More intriguing, inside the hospital you'll find a bona fide art gallery. The pieces on the wall here are all for sale and help fund the work of this Cleveland Clinic subsidiary, with the money split equally between the artist and the hospital. The major difference between this and most such philanthropic galleries is the caliber of the work—by the likes of Pop Art icon James Rosenquist and ceramicist and surf culture chronicler Ken Price.

Westward Ho: Contemporary Masters at Red Rock



Two pieces from Damien Hirst at Red Rock.

Perhaps just as surprising as a medical center stuffed with important works of art is what's happening 13 miles west. Stroll south past [Red Rock Casino, Resort & Spa](#) toward its corporate offices and you'll be greeted by Kate Moss—or at least a sculpture of the supermodel by British artist Marc Quinn. It's part of his notorious series depicting Moss, her body whitewashed and pretzeled into tantric poses and her expression disconcertingly blank. The brothers who own Red Rock, Frank and Lorenzo Fertitta, are passionate collectors of contemporary art and install select pieces from their holdings, like Quinn's work, in the resort's public areas. In the lobby you'll find two pieces by Damien Hirst, arguably the most famous artist working today. One is a 30-foot-long spot painting, among the largest Hirst has ever executed, while the other is a dove, caught in midflight then encased in formaldehyde—simultaneously beautiful and revolting. The Fertitta

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brothers even commissioned work from photographer Olivo Barbieri, known for his aerial landscape photos shot to look like miniature models. After they saw that he had shot a sequence of Las Vegas scenes, they asked him to produce a second series of 20 images focusing exclusively on Red Rock, and these now dot the property's buildings.



A Downtown mural by British artist D-Face, installed for last year's Life Is Beautiful festival.

The cracked paint on Quinn's Moss sculpture, however, hints at why public art projects in Las Vegas are harder to manage and maintain than in most American cities. "The elements are so difficult here—the materials and the harshness of the heat," notes the city's top art consultant, Michele Quinn. "Wind is a factor, and color doesn't last well." Hopefully, there are conservators at work on the murals that remain from last year's Life Is Beautiful festival downtown. A clutch of would-be Banksys were tapped to create murals to decorate the neighborhood, some of which can still be seen, largely along and around Seventh Street. The quality of the work varies wildly,

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but an undoubted standout is the huge Pop Art-meets-zombie apocalypse piece by British street artist Dean Stockton, better known as D*Face.

In Plain Sight: On the Strip



Nancy Rubins's brightly colored bouquet of boats, *Big Edge*, at CityCenter.

It was Michele Quinn who oversaw the installation of the outdoor art of the Strip's CityCenter complex. This \$40 million project includes 15 works by contemporary artists. Standouts include Nancy Rubins's brightly colored bouquet of boats, *Big Edge*, and the huge stainless steel sculpture by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Typewriter Eraser, Scale X*. Two of the site's other pieces lurk indoors, sparkling works by James Turrell, an artist obsessed with the power of light—housed, fittingly, in The Shops at Crystals. *Shards of Color* is ill-served by its location, more akin to an architectural doodad than a work by one of the world's top conceptual artists. But the second piece, *Akhob*, is a true must-see. This enormous work sits

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unmarked on its own floor inside, and above, the Louis Vuitton store. Just make an appointment, and when you arrive, you'll be whisked upstairs. Here Turrell has created one of his largest works ever, and a true masterpiece: a womblike installation, flooded with ever-changing light that's meditative and unsettling at the same time. It's sheltered from the Strip's hubbub (Bavington calls it "a sorbet to Las Vegas," a spiritual palate cleanser), and each tour is limited to four people, so the experience remains intense and private, like accessing an art-world VIP room.



James Turrell's *Shards of Color*, four recessed geometric shapes backlit in neon, which debuted last year next to the gateway to aria sign on the main level of The Shops at Crystals.

Cosmopolitan partnered with the New York–based Art Production Fund to create a comprehensive program of contemporary work, whether it's the eight discofied columns at check-in, shimmering with color-saturated videos, or the poppy murals on the concrete walls of the self-park garage. Called Wallworks, the garage project includes contributions by Shinique Smith, Kenny Scharf, and Shepard Fairey.

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Cosmopolitan's self-park garage gets a dose of certified urban art with Wallworks

Cosmopolitan's quirkiest art outpost, however, sits on the mezzanine level among the hotel's high-end restaurants: the P3 studio. This residency space has hosted artists such as Fab 5 Freddy and Shelter Serra (nephew of Richard), who live and work there gratis for several weeks. Early this year, the closing party for local artist Alisha Kerlin seemed like any other glitzy evening bash on the Strip—at least at first glance. Trays of Champagne flutes were emptied as soon as they appeared, the crowd's chatter just raucous enough to drown out the background music. Something about the bash, though, was off-kilter, as one stiletto-sporting passerby noticed, puzzled. She was right: The room was full of men and women in animal accessories—one shunting a gorilla mask up over his forehead to more easily finish another glass of Champagne.

The reason for such outré outfits was simple: Kerlin called her zoo-inspired residency "Marking Territory." Huddled inside this discreet art hub were a passel of the city's cultural heavyweights,

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including consultant Michele Quinn; Aurore Giguët, from the Marjorie Barrick Museum; and Tarissa Tiberti, who runs the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art. It's Tiberti who summed up the subtle approach to art so characteristic of Las Vegas right now: "You have to take into consideration all the competition for attention: the marquees, the LED screen graphics, the signage." Art that screams will be drowned out, she explains, while art that whispers will eventually earn the right attention.