



# Vegas

## Visionaries

LAS VEGAS' ARTS DISTRICT IS HOME TO MORE THAN 50 GALLERIES,  
STUDIOS AND BOUTIQUES. BY LESLEY BALLA • PHOTOGRAPHY BY SETH KUSHNER



Opposite page: Graphic designer Brian Swanson in Cricket Studio  
This page: Buildings in the Las Vegas Arts District

**L**as Vegas is also known as Sin City and the Entertainment Capital of the World. It's a neon utopia filled with clanging slot machines, glittery showgirls, Cirque du Soleil, Elvis and poker chips—not really the kind of place that screams “high culture,” unless you count the strolling opera singers at the Venetian. **But beyond the lights and the fantasy lies a burgeoning local art scene that's turning heads both locally and nationally.** From First Fridays in the Arts District to the graffiti “galleries” found beneath the Strip, there's a hub of creativity that's hard to ignore. >



Artist Jennifer Main at her gallery

**N**o one really mentioned art in Vegas until Steve Wynn opened the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art at the Bellagio Hotel and Casino in 1998. Art critics were skeptical, but at the time it was as close to sophistication as it got on the Strip. The Venetian followed suit with the Guggenheim Hermitage Museum, which has featured works by Monet and Ansel Adams. These were turning points for the arts in Vegas, and the slot-pulling masses took notice.

Those resort galleries were a boon for the Strip but did little for the local arts community. Local art finally became a focal point in 1997, when photographer Wes Myles bought an aging two-story building on the corner of Main Street and Charleston Boulevard in a decaying part of downtown. At the time, he wanted it to be like SoHo or any other urban arts district. He convinced friends to move to the area for its cheap and abundant gallery and studio space, and he worked with the city to rejuvenate the neighborhood.

Now known as **The Arts Factory** ([www.theartsfactory.com](http://www.theartsfactory.com)), the building is home to

almost 30 tenants, a mix of galleries, boutiques, art studios, and architecture and design firms. The neighborhood around it has also blossomed into a thriving artistic area.

Graphic designer Brian Swanson opened **Cricket Studio** ([www.cricketstudio.com](http://www.cricketstudio.com)) in The Arts Factory in 1997, moving to Las Vegas after the Northridge earthquake shook him and partner Dar Freeland from the overcrowded Los Angeles arts scene. Moving east meant exploring an untapped market, a place where he would be one of only a handful of graphic artists, not one of hundreds. "We always came here to get away," he says. "But it was a better place to get involved with the scene. We saw a lot of possibility."

Swanson and Freeland opened **Face Up Gallery** ([www.faceupstudio.com](http://www.faceupstudio.com)) in The Arts Factory, where they showcase their art work. Freeland's pieces include photo compositions and large-scale collages. And Swanson often combines drawings with tongue-in-cheek themes. His decidedly off-kilter "Bug Speak" series is filled with bug renderings and things a bug might write (bees "buzz," for example).

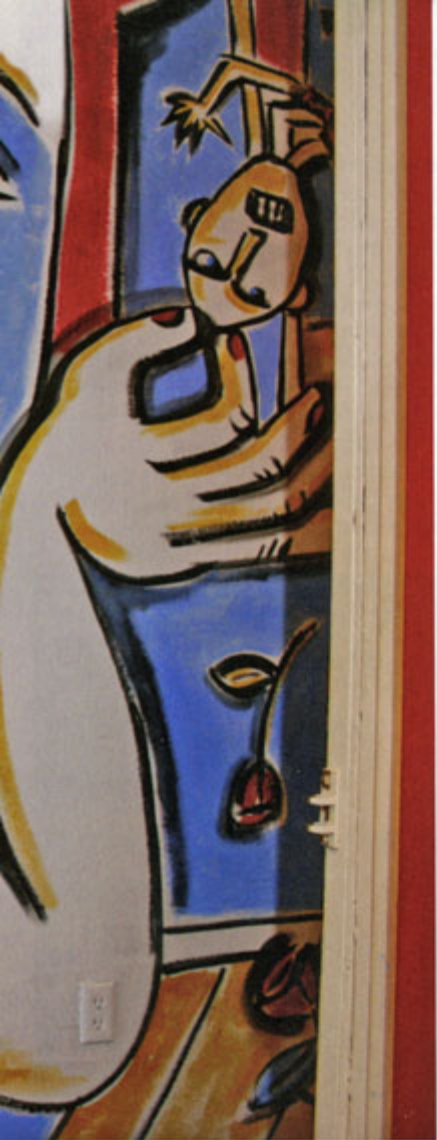
## Find Art

**It may be off the Strip and—gasp—not in a casino, but that doesn't mean the Arts District is hard to get to.**

**From the Strip,** take a taxi to the corner of Charleston and Casino Center.

**On public transportation,** take the public Deuce bus to the Howard Johnson at 1401 S. Las Vegas Blvd. and walk, or take the CAT bus to the Main and Charleston intersection.

**On First Fridays,** there's a free trolley system with various stops throughout the neighborhood.



Not too long ago, along with 31 other local artists, Swanson donated a painted "art chair" to an auction for the Extreme Palate Project, which raised funds for Studio 8 Ten, a place where artists can teach crafting and design to those with disabilities. It's that sense of community that Swanson most appreciates. "The Arts Factory is really the hub of it all," he says.

As the galleries filled in, the tenants began hosting events every few months, but the scene really came together with the advent of **First Friday** ([www.firstfriday-lasvegas.org](http://www.firstfriday-lasvegas.org)). The monthly event takes place the first Friday of every month, and it is truly the hallmark of the downtown arts scene.

Part street fair, part gallery open house, it attracts almost 10,000 people to the downtown neighborhood every month. The festival celebrated its fifth anniversary last October and is now considered

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## Gallery Grub

Take a break at one of these Arts District eateries.

### TINOCO'S BISTRO

A bistro with excellent seafood and wine menus. [www.tinocos.net](http://www.tinocos.net); 702-464-5008

### CASA DON JUAN

A colorful Mexican eatery with décor to match. 702-384-8070

one of the strongest community events in the city. There's work from more than 100 local artists set up in tents along Colorado Avenue and Casino Center, and more than 80 indoor arts, food, drink and shop venues open their doors. There's live entertainment and street performances for the all-ages, all-walks-of-life crowd (which tends to skew young and edgy). The neighborhood still has that gritty feel that permeates any self-respecting burgeoning urban arts center (*à la* SoHo circa 1979), but it's hard to notice when there are so many people filling the streets.

Much of the credit for First Friday's success goes to Cindy Funkhouser, a former Four Queens Hotel and Casino bartender-turned-antique shop owner. She started showing art in the back of **The Funk House** ([www.thefunkhouselasvegas.com](http://www.thefunkhouselasvegas.com)).

That regular First Friday traffic helped artist Danny Roberts put his name and work on the map. The 35-year-old painter started exhibiting in 2004. "First Friday felt important," he says. "It wasn't just about Vegas; it was cultural."

Roberts opened **Damned Ink Studios** ([www.damnedinkstudios.com](http://www.damnedinkstudios.com)) at The Arts Factory in February 2007, and he has a new exhibit up every month for First Friday. His work is dark and brooding social commentary. "It connects with the young set," he says.

While he sells prints, T-shirts and original paintings during the festival, the constant flow of people seeing his work was worth more than the money.



Danny Roberts at Damned Ink Studios

### BISTRÒ DIVINO

Holsum Design Center eatery serves pizza, panini and salads for lunch and dinner. [www.bistrodivino.com](http://www.bistrodivino.com); 702-362-8200

### CHICAGO JOE'S

Nearby Italian restaurant housed in a brick bungalow with Old World charm. [www.chicagojoesrestaurant.com](http://www.chicagojoesrestaurant.com); 702-382-5637

com) on a monthly basis in early 2002, which made her realize the need for exhibition space for artists.

"I went to Portland, Oregon, to visit my son and experienced their First Thursday event," Funkhouser says. "I didn't see why we should not have a similar event in Las Vegas." After a few months of planning with friends and fellow business owners Julie Brewer and Naomi Arin, the first First Friday took place in October 2002, attracting about 300 people.

"The art scene was struggling then," Funkhouser says. "Not that we still aren't, but we have momentum now." She says the festival helped unify the scene and eventually attracted new businesses. "It changed the public perception of the area," she says.

Roberts gained a slew of new fans when a local magazine hosted an art show that included his work at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino. And recently, TAO Nightclub at the Venetian started showing local artists' work, including Roberts'. "I don't think that would have happened if First Friday wasn't so successful," he says.

As First Friday became an impetus for growth, more galleries opened. All in all, the 18-block area has more than 50 galleries and design studios, plus lots of restaurants, bars and shops.

**Commerce Street Studios** ([www.commercestreetstudios.com](http://www.commercestreetstudios.com)) is home to **Archinofsky Gallery** (702-845-6214), a venue for contemporary photography and sculpture, and

MTZC ([www.mtzc.com](http://www.mtzc.com)), where Mark T. Zeilman shows his and other local artists' work. With operations in other major US cities, **S2 Art Center and Atelier** ([www.s2art.com](http://www.s2art.com)), a publisher and dealer of limited-edition lithographs, opened next to The Arts Factory. Just behind S2 is **Sharon Gainsburg Studio** ([www.gainsburgstudio.com](http://www.gainsburgstudio.com)), where Gainsburg carves art out of stones.

Nearby, **Holsum Design Center** ([www.holsumlofts.com](http://www.holsumlofts.com)), a former bakery, holds a number of art and design firms. And **Dust Gallery** ([www.dustgallery.com](http://www.dustgallery.com)) on Main Street is one of the most up-and-coming galleries in the West.

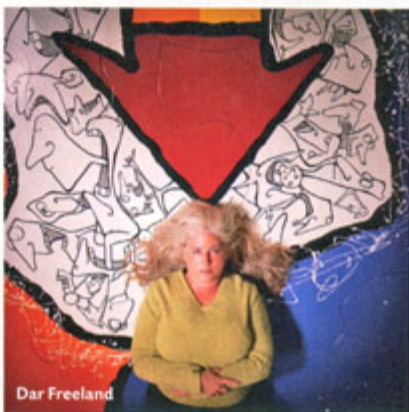
According to artist Jennifer Main, the work coming out of Vegas is very diverse. The 27-year-old Las Vegas native opened **Jennifer Main Gallery** ([www.jennifermaingallery.com](http://www.jennifermaingallery.com)) in The Arts Factory in 2004.

She says there weren't many galleries for contemporary art when she first started 10 years ago. "Back then, most of what you saw was cowboy stuff, landscapes, a lot of mauve and turquoise. My work didn't really fit in," she says.

Main uses bold colors for her figurative paintings, which might have something to do with growing up in Las Vegas. "If anything, it would be the lights," she says. "Everything is extra flashy here. And I don't try to tone down my work. I'm more open to all kinds of ideas here because, really, anything does go. I've never been



Sharon Gainsburg Studio



Dar Freeland

embarrassed about putting things out there and making a statement."

There are still a lot of artists who capitalize on Vegas as a theme in their work. You'll find photos of classic Vegas, showgirls and neon. There's also a lot of abstract art. It's the range and the diversity of themes, textures and colors that make the Vegas art scene interesting. "I'm always amazed at what I see. Everything that everyone else does is so different from what I do. I'm always impressed," Swanson says.

In most major urban areas, artists are often the first to restore life to downtrodden neighborhoods. They add color, figuratively and literally,

with their pioneering spirit, projects and *joie de vivre*. And once they make it their home, others follow.

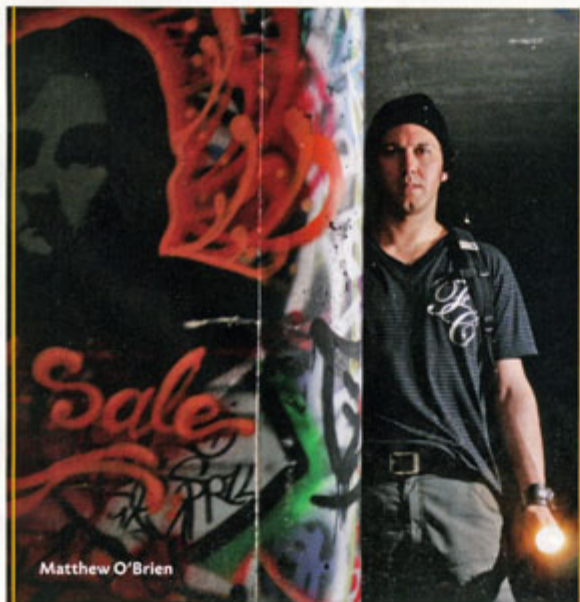
The same is happening in Las Vegas. The city is in a huge building phase, both on the Strip and downtown. Developers have taken an interest in the Arts District, and new condos and lofts are going up nearby. With these living spaces come more retail, restaurants and bars, and ultimately, foot traffic.

Swanson watched the area blossom around The Arts Factory and says he's always meeting people from other art scenes around the country who eye the area with envy. "They see all these empty buildings and want to work here," he says.

"It's given a lot of people a chance to open their own galleries," Main echoes. "It doesn't cost as much because it's downtown. But now everything is [getting] so expensive, even for me. Having the opportunity to have an affordable space made all the difference."

But cheap rent isn't the only reason why people want to move into the area. Swanson says it's the strength of the arts community. "It really is one of the only communities that I've really seen in this town," he says. "It's like one giant family."

Visitors are also a huge part of the equation. "First Friday gives tourists a chance to experience the real Las Vegas," Funkhouser says. It's an opportunity to attend a predominantly local event, which tourists like to do—even in Vegas. And in a city where fantasies are fulfilled every day, it seems that the dreams of these local artists are finally coming true. **S**



Matthew O'Brien

## Below the Surface

Some of Vegas' art is so far under the radar it can't be seen without a flashlight, waterproof boots and nerves of steel.

Vegas has an underground art scene—literally. Through journalist Matthew O'Brien's *Beneath the Neon: Life and Death in the Tunnels of Las Vegas* (Huntington Press), readers can take a tour of the art that exists in flood channels below the showy world above. He found pockets of graffiti art, from simple scrawls to poignant murals. "There's anime, lettering, political messages and poetry," O'Brien says. "Some of the same artists who do graffiti downtown at The Arts Factory, I've seen them in these storm drains." Most of the artists are locals who started in their teens.

One "gallery" is about a half mile in, only found after a trek in complete darkness. "You're in a black and gray world that suddenly becomes very colorful," O'Brien says. Certainly "off the Strip"—albeit in a different direction than the Arts District—this underground world can apparently be as much the muse to the artists of Las Vegas as the one above.