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# Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk draws gallery hoppers



Spencer Weiner / Los Angeles Times

**CARNIVAL ATMOSPHERE:** A street artist painting a portrait draws a small crowd in downtown. The monthly art walk draws 2,000 to 3,000 visitors to more than 40 galleries.

**The monthly event attracts 2,000 to 3,000 visitors to more than 40 galleries.**

By Yvonne Villarreal  
February 8, 2009

The three giant block letters beaming in electric yellow at the Museum of Neon Art serve not only as a flashy window display for the West 4th Street space but as a reminder of what brings together throngs to the sidewalks of downtown Los Angeles on the second Thursday of each month: ART.

Downtown's Art Walk turns the streets into an artistic carnival. Here on Gallery Row -- bounded by Main and Spring streets from 2nd to 9th streets -- the scene is as eclectic as the people it has attracted: haircuts being given on sidewalks; saxophone melodies wafting through the smoggy air; a retrofitted 1940s school bus shuttling attendees to off-site galleries. Inspired by the scene, artists let the environment dictate the imagery as they paint on makeshift canvases taped to chain-link fences.



Photos: Art Walk

» Video: Art Walk: Journey of Steps

"It's cool," said Nick Estrada, 30, editor of SlamxHype.com, which curated "Bailout," a group show exploring the concept of consumerism, at the Continental Gallery at last month's festivities. "It has a fun vibe. The streets are electric and full of people from all walks of life who appreciate the different forms of expression

showcased in all the galleries. It's something the city definitely needs."

When it was founded in 2004 by Bert Green of Bert Green Fine Art on West 5th Street, the streetscape was a less-than-desirable place to stroll at night. Drug dealers and homeless people roamed the area, Green said.

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But art didn't go slowly into the night. The monthly walking tour has grown from eight galleries and 100 visitors to more than 40 galleries and between 2,000 and 3,000 visitors.

That kind of growth demonstrates the richness of L.A.'s art scene, said developer Tom Gilmore, whose conversion of old bank buildings along Main Street into rental lofts nearly a decade ago helped spark the

revitalization of the area.

"The challenge will be to keep it focused on art and not to make it a party scene," Gilmore said. "You can make a party anywhere, but this is a creative, genuine environment that no one had to invent."

This month's art walk sees the addition of Mundo Maya/Galeria Mijares and Spring Street Gallery to the rich lineup that already includes galleries such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Gallery at REDCAT, Pharmaka Art and the Hive Gallery, among others. And Company of Angels Theater will present "L.O.L!!" a stand-up comedy show starring Rawle Lewis, Karen Anzoategui and others at the Alexandria Hotel.

As downtown's revitalization efforts continue with the development of arts and entertainment venues such as the L.A. Live entertainment and sports complex, the self-guided art tour has blossomed into a full-fledged gallery-hopping event, where art enthusiasts visit commercial art galleries and museums throughout the day and early evening.

In the last year, it has been expanded to include additional venues, such as restaurants, bars and retail services that help fund the event's marketing efforts in exchange for being included on the Art Walk map.

Kim Toga, director of the Museum of Neon Art, says continuing to draw a diverse crowd with eclectic taste is essential to the efforts of exposing new talent. "It's a very important event for emerging artists who wouldn't get attention otherwise," Toga said.

And as the financial downturn continues, it remains to be seen how the Art Walk will adapt. "With the economic climate, things might decline slightly and it's possible we could lose some galleries," Green said. "Hopefully, the economic downturn might help stop the rising prices in the neighborhood and more galleries could open up."

But as galleries prepare exhibitions and installations for this month's Art Walk, it's another reminder of the malleable arts district that has been created since the event's inception.

"In the beginning it was smaller and it was trying to find its identity," Gilmore said. "Now it's much larger and much more popular . . . and it continues to search for its identity. That's the power of it. I hope it never actually finds its identity. Its journey has been a lot more interesting than the goal."

It's a journey of steps. An art walk.

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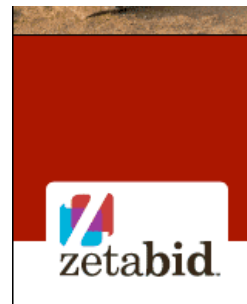


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