

Visions of art

From action-sports apparel to combined salons and galleries, Costa Mesa has become a haven for artists and their creations.

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The moniker City of the Arts has become a self-fulfilling prophecy for Costa Mesa. Long established as a destination for the performing arts, Costa Mesa has become a hot-bed for visual artists as well.

The art scene has been growing for several years, as galleries have been popping up along with bars and clothing outlets that cater to an artistic crowd, especially on the Westside.

"There's more creativity here than really anywhere else in Orange County," says Christopher Martin, director of the World Gallery.

Martin defected to Costa Mesa from Laguna Beach, whose status as an artists' community was well established when Costa Mesa was still mostly farming fields.

It's a movement that has been gaining attention from outside the scene as well. Mayor Eric Bever said he has been watching art multiply in the city over the past several years.

"It was always kind of an underground thing, but now we're letting it bubble up to the surface," Bever said. "We have a real organic artist district that created itself without any contrivance by the city. It's the real McCoy."

Costa Mesa has designated the area as 19 West to signify that the Westside has an established art district.

One reason Costa Mesa has become a happening spot for artists is plain economics.

Costa Mesa's industrial areas on the Westside offer large spaces for artists in which to work and sometimes live. They are cost-effective because art is an unstable source of income and young, working artists often look for the cheapest spaces they can find.

The result is not unlike what the area south of Houston Street in New York City experienced when artists started taking over industrial spaces. A new movement and scene developed around them in the district, called Soho.

"The artists always go where they can afford to live," said Jack Flynn of the J Flynn Gallery near The Lab.

Surprisingly, the action sports apparel industry has also had a large influence in Costa Mesa arts.

Many of the most popular companies in skate, surf and snowboard come from Costa Mesa or have set roots here. Hurley and Volcom are both headquartered in Costa Mesa and Vision and Quiksilver were both in Costa Mesa at one time.

Many artists and designers came to Costa Mesa to work for these companies, including Brett Walker. It was the skate industry that originally drew Bever to the city when he began working as a graphic artists for Vision in the 1980s.

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Walker was aware there were problems for artists working for action sports companies. Artists, he said, were often taken advantage of.

This inspired him to found eVocal on 19th Street, a mixed-use space operated as an apparel outlet for local clothing designers, a gallery space and a music venue.

The idea behind eVocal is artists helping artists. Music fans coming to eVocal bring in an audience for the art and apparel as well.

“We identified what was wrong with the industry and looked at how we could create something unique,” Walker said. “There’s an infrastructure that prevents new ideas from reaching the market. We decided to create an infrastructure that artists could move into. We help them do the things they can’t do for themselves.”

The Box Gallery, part of the art scene developing around the Lab and the Camp, alternative retail spaces adjacent to each other on Bristol Avenue, is another example of artists working together.

Christopher Hall operates a hair salon in the space as well as the gallery.

That sense of artistic community is evident within the city’s budding art scene.

Martin hopes to form a Westside Artists Alliance, while eVocal regularly hosts benefit events for local groups and is engaged in a project that involves the painting of Estancia High School’s trash cans.

“The macro-concept is to bring people to Costa Mesa — Westside in particular — as an art destination,” Martin said.

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