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# ART IN OAKLAND

Creativity shines brightly in the East Bay

By Kristen Haney

» It's a sunny Saturday afternoon in Oakland's Jingtowntown neighborhood, and I'm in a group of more than a dozen people gathered around a cement planter, where a guide has helped us discover an unexpected, vibrant mosaic of broken, repurposed tiles in the shape of a lizard peeking out from among overgrown weeds. Before today, most of my group had never been to this part of Oakland (aka "The Town") and even fewer—myself included—realized that 22 mosaic animals are hidden throughout Jingtowntown. Blocks away, we find Oakland's giant White Elephant mural on the side of the Oakland Museum Women's Board building. Around another corner, we visit a collective of local artists making everything from custom frames out of repurposed building materials to steel sculptures welded into abstract shapes.

We're on the local nonprofit Oakland Art Murmur's Gallery District Walking Tour. The tour celebrates a different creativity-rich district of the city each month. The group is diverse, in terms of age, race and gender—and we're discovering an even more varied



» Oakland's varied art scene includes gallery shows, top left; the Oakland Museum of California, top right, which hosts popular evening events; street murals by Dragon School, center; and works from Creative Growth Art Center, above, a venue for people with disabilities to create art.

assortment of art spread across local galleries, sidewalks and streets. It's one of the things about Oakland I love most: You never know where you'll find artistic expression, or whom you'll find it with.

Another area I always find great art—and people who enjoy art—is the KoNo (or Koreatown-Northgate) district of the city, which comes alive for the monthly Oakland First Fridays events, block parties that draw up to about 30,000 people. At these events, you might find local artisans selling everything from glimmering wire-art creatures to batik-dyed clothing; fledgling MCs performing outside an arthouse movie theater; or random passersby drawn into a crowd-participation dance to the *Cha-Cha Slide*.

The monthly street fest started in 2012 as an extension of Oakland Art Murmur First Fridays, when galleries stay open late and host special events to entice the public to explore Oakland art and mingle with the people who create it. Oakland Art Murmur has been celebrating the arts in the city for 11 years, and now champions more than 50 galleries across five main districts, with six monthly gallery days and strolls, including the walk I joined in Jingtowntown. Members of Oakland Art Murmur include traditional galleries as well as unusual destinations, such as SoleSpace, a premium sneaker boutique that doubles as a venue for social justice and arts events; Classic Cars West, a vintage-auto showroom that includes

TOP LEFT, OAKLAND ART MURMUR FIRST FRIDAY ART WALK, CHANDRA CERRITO, CONTEMPORARY ARTIST BRIAN CARAWAY, TOP RIGHT, ODELL HUSSEY PHOTOGRAPHY; CENTER, FUMING GUERILLA PRODUCTIONS; BOTTOM, DIANA ROTHBERG, COURTESY CREATIVE GROWTH ART CENTER, OAKLAND



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gallery space, a beer garden and a vegan restaurant; and Creative Growth Art Center, which for more than four decades has served as a venue for adults with disabilities to create art.

A particular type of artistic innovation is flourishing in the downtown and Chinatown neighborhoods thanks to a group of street artists and local teens who tag the walls of consenting local businesses with a symbol of prosperity—the dragon. Over the past two years, Dragon School has created more than 150 murals, with artists and young adults from nearby schools beautifying the area with dragons of various styles and colors that serve as a reminder of the diversity of the city itself.

“The strength of what we do is that it’s a microcosm of the city—we’re bringing together all these people from different walks of life who all have different life experiences to infuse into their art,” says Sage Loring, executive director of Dragon School. “It’s something that’s just not one thing. That’s the special sauce of it.”

The city’s largest art institution, Oakland Museum of California, transcends the role of a traditional museum through innovative events and exhibitions. Every Friday, the museum keeps lights on at night and offers discounted admission, a craft fair, music and food trucks for Friday Nights @ OMCA.

Recent special exhibitions at OMCA have mixed traditional installations with participatory activities. Through January 21, the museum is showing “Nature’s Gift: Humans, Friends & the Unknown,” a giant rainbow-lit, interactive, multisensory sculptural exhibit. From March 24 through August 12, 2018, the museum will show “Respect: Hip-Hop Style and Wisdom,” an exhibition centered on the evolution of hip-hop and its influence on cultural and social movements. The show will include opportunities for visitors to hone lyrical skills, discover how Eastern philosophy has swayed seminal hip-hop groups, and learn about the Bay Area’s importance to the greater hip-hop community.



### Icon of Oakland

**Drive through Oakland,** and the most prolific image you’ll see on car windows and in storefronts isn’t a political statement. Its prominence may even rival the emblem of a certain local basketball team defending an NBA title. The iconic image shows an oak tree with roots and branches outstretched, the logo for the socially minded, Oakland-based apparel and accessories company **Oaklandish**. The image is, in turn, a variation on the City of Oakland’s official tree logo.

“I think the Oaklandish tree is the most common bumper sticker in Oakland,” says Chris White, community coordinator for the company. “It’s a feel-good logo, and if you’re connected to Oakland, you know what it is. It acts as a connection to other people from the city.”

Started as a public art project in 2000 that has since evolved into four brick-and-mortar locations, Oaklandish produces everything from T-shirts that celebrate city pride to jackets and jerseys emblazoned with old-school lettering—in Oakland A’s

and Golden State Warriors’ colors—to prints of city sights such as the Bay Bridge and Oakland’s iconic shipping-container cranes.

Much like its logo, Oaklandish has strong roots in the community. As it produces tees, hats and hoodies designed by Oakland artists and screenprinted in the city, the company creates inner-city jobs, offers a limited-edition shirt for city high school students with a GPA of 3.5 or higher, and donates a portion of its proceeds to nonprofits committed to Oakland, often with a focus on those that serve city youth.

“The T-shirts and accessories are really a means to an end. The main goals are to create jobs and to give people a real sense of belonging in Oakland,” says owner Angela Tsay. “There’s sometimes sensitivity with newcomers coming into the city, but our feeling is, if you move here or travel here and care enough to learn about what was here before you—and if Oaklandish can help you become more involved in the community—then you’re a part of the city.”

—K.H.

“We’re competing with the sofa and phones, so an exhibition has to be relevant, fun and interactive,” says Museum Deputy Director Kelly McKinley. “We put ourselves in the same family of engagement as the city’s other cultural offerings and street fairs. We’re all storytellers.”

What excellent stories are being told through the arts in Oakland—through its street art and sculptures, its galleries and event spaces, and its conventional and unconventional art institutions. ✎

*Kristen Haney writes from the Oakland area.*