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# tucson MEET OUR *makers*

This month, our Meet our Makers newsletter features one of Tucson's brightest lights, Mel Dominguez, a muralist, painter, visual artist, feminist, and Chicana, queer and community advocate. Through their artwork, they depict the nuanced stories of the Borderlands, while providing a safe space for the community to share their creativity at Dominguez's Galeria Mitotera. Keep reading to learn about Mel or click on the What's New link below for the latest and greatest media updates from Tucson.

[What's New in Tucson](#)



## Meet Mel Dominguez

Sometimes life's purpose isn't immediately revealed. Mel "Melo" Dominguez is the first person to admit that.

The muralist, painter, visual artist, feminist, and Chicana, queer and community advocate recalls having their artistic awakening in Tucson, a place they weren't initially drawn to but now describes as "magic."

Dominguez's reassessment of Tucson came at a time when their health was in question. A survivor of chronic pancreatitis, they spent eight harrowing weeks in the hospital fighting for their life and pondering next steps.

"I was given a second chance, a rebirth. I knew how important it was for me to do all the things that I needed to do and stories I wanted to paint. I told myself there, okay, I've got to do this," Dominguez said.

In the summer of 2018, Dominguez and their wife Melissa's dream was realized when they opened [Galeria Mitotera](#) in the City of South Tucson, an enclave within larger Tucson. For the first time in their life, Dominguez had a place to create and display their artwork and showcase the creativity of the community they so love, all while creating a safe space for people from all different walks of life.

"I never wanted to open up the gallery to just be my art. It was always intended to support other artists," Dominguez said. "Within South Tucson, there are a lot of indigenous folks, there are Mexicanos, Chicanos, and there are white folks that have been here since when it was ranch land. I've learned about them and their history through Galeria Mitotera."



The art that lines the walls of the gallery tells the stories of the Borderlands and the omnipresent political, social and environmental struggles of their inhabitants, a subject that is near and dear to Dominguez's heart.

A native of east Los Angeles, Dominguez's grandparents played a large role in their upbringing after their father was deported to Mexico. They credit their grandfather as the person who encouraged them to be an artist.

“I remember one morning my grandpa was eating breakfast and we were watching the news, and there was all this scary stuff happening, so he changed the channel and put Popeye on, and it was just like magic, because we both went from feeling sad and scared to laughing,” Dominguez said. “Even though I was small... I realized that Popeye broke a barrier through visual communication. That was my little aha moment.”

In the ensuing years, Dominguez continued to explore their interest in art, surrounded by murals that chronicled many of the same hardships they and their family faced. They began experimenting and finding their style, initially as a graffiti artist and later as a production artist, getting jobs crafting movie sets while supplementing their income with odd jobs like delivering flowers and doing construction work.

It was during this time, that Dominguez met their now-wife, Jessica, who had family living in Tucson. In 2007, at the onset of the Great Recession, the couple made the move from Los Angeles to Tucson.

“When she brought me, there was no development. Downtown was not like it is today,” Dominguez said. “I remember thinking that Tucson must have been where they filmed *The Walking Dead*.”

After months of searching for a job to no avail, Dominguez set aside their artistic notions and began working as a tow truck driver. Then, in 2010, in the wake of Arizona’s notorious, SB1070, Dominguez’s passion for art was reawakened.

“We had a contract with Border Patrol, so every now and again, I would be called out to seize a vehicle. It was heartbreaking to see how these people were being treated as they were going to work,” Dominguez said. “To process that, I’d come home and... start doodling. One day I drew this lucha libre, a Mexican wrestler, and he’s got a family in the car, and they’re all wearing wrestling masks, and he’s asking, ‘Why am I being stopped?’”



That was the beginning of Dominguez reasserting himself as an artist. After hosting an atelier in Los Angeles and creating limited edition prints of that drawing, the momentum continued. They became the resident artist at the Tucson Tamale Co. and they placed their recycled artwork in Fourth Avenue's Pop Cycle.

As Dominguez's portfolio grew, so did their popularity. The Tucson-Pima Arts Council nominated Dominguez as Emerging Artist of the Year in 2012. Shortly thereafter, they were hired to co-create a piece at Biosphere 2 that illustrated the impact of climate change.

Their artwork caught the eye of University of Arizona Professor of Art Emeritus Alfred Quiroz, who owns the building where Galeria Mitotera is located. Previously a storage unit for Quiroz, he cleared out the space when he heard of Dominguez's vision. In hindsight, Dominguez credits much of their success as an artist to people like Quiroz.

"If you come to Tucson just for a weekend, you won't even scrape the surface. You have to really get to know the community because that's where it's at. People here, they find you. They bring you to their homes. They share their meals and their family lifestyles and interests, whether it be in sports, mariachi, or the art scene," Dominguez said. "We're in such a beautiful, almost utopian environment in Tucson and people really support one another."

Today, Dominguez remains passionate about giving back to the community that has welcomed them with open arms. For years Dominguez has been volunteering at the John Valenzuela Youth Center in South Tucson, "growing up alongside the kids there," and at the low-income senior housing Casa de Bernie Sedley building, where they make meals and play Lotería with the elderly every month.

Now, Dominguez and their wife Jessica are about to take on their largest community-building project yet. Recently, the owner of longtime South Tucson business Stewart Boot Company announced his retirement and sold the building to the couple. They're in the process of reimagining the 8,000-square-foot building, which they're calling 30 West. Dominguez says it will be used to house large art installations and host community forums. They even hope to offer an artist residency there. And in January, Dominguez says they'll open 30 West with a satellite version of the Louis Carlos Bernal show that is on display at the University of Arizona Center for Creative Photography through March 15, 2025.

"Our goal with this new space is to provide more access to arts and culture. So often we get phone calls from members of the community asking if it's free to come into Galeria Mitotera. And I'm like, 'Oh my god, yes.' There are still so many barriers in our community, and we want to break those down," Dominguez said. "During Covid, we were all faced with these life and death consequences and losing family members. We have this new understanding of our obligation and responsibility to really be with each other in this human way. By creating a community space filled with artwork, we are allowing for that."



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