

metroactive ARTS



Ethan Gregory Dodge

SEA CHANGE During SJ Walls, tides of paint turn the city into a canvas.

WALL STREET

'Largest corridor of street art in Bay Area' almost complete in San Jose

BY ETHAN GREGORY DODGE

AS SAN JOSEANS WALK downtown's Guadalupe River Park this weekend, a few freshly painted pieces of street art will welcome them. The new works sit alongside many long-standing pieces, nearly all commissioned by San Jose Walls, an annual, week-long event bringing waves of murals to Shark City.

San Jose Walls is part of the larger Worldwide Walls festival. Previously known as POW! WOW! Worldwide, the event series started in Hawaii in 2011 and soon expanded around the world.

Upon visiting the event in Hawaii, Juan Carlos Araujo was awed by the welcoming atmosphere and high-quality art. Already the co-owner and founder of San Jose's Empire Seven Studios, Araujo knew he wanted to bring the event back home.

"The goal has always been to put a spotlight on San Jose and champion our arts and culture," he says. "I want to be in my city. I was born and raised in this city. I don't want to go to San Francisco or a place where the market is better. I believe in our city."

Getting a gallery off the ground in San Jose, however, wasn't easy.

"We weren't necessarily being championed, if I'm being honest. It was very hard, it's still hard," Araujo

recalls of the early years. "There was a sense of activism, putting up public art that really spoke to me as a person coming from my background."

San Jose Walls first launched in 2017. This week, the series completes a mission it began with in 2020: creating the "Bay Area's largest public art corridor."

The vision began with a lengthy mural by local artist Roan Victor painted across the Woz Way bridge on the southern end of the Guadalupe River Park. Nine more murals join it this year, giving the park a total of 16, a dozen of which were commissioned by San Jose Walls. The entire collection spans two and a half miles.

Melissa Manuel, a tattoo artist at Humble Beginnings Tattoo, joins the event this year with her first-ever mural. Manuel views it as a transitional moment for her as an artist. Born to immigrant Filipino parents in the Santa Clara Valley, she says the act of preserving and honoring that heritage is central to her art, paying homage to immigrant families like her own.

"I've been wanting to do things

like this. I've been wanting to have this kind of representation. I haven't done anything this big, in terms of giving back to, being part of, or representing a community, aside from tattooing."

The mural depicts a series of large waves pushing a canoe forward. Its edge meets another mural by fellow Humble Beginnings artist Ricardo Gonzoe Gonzalez, featuring a woman adorned in California poppies. Both celebrate the generations of immigrants that have made the Golden State what it is today, a call to remember their culture and preserve its identity.

"If you talk to people who are my age, it's hard for us to find things that are deeply rooted in our culture. Our culture gets very westernized," Manuel says.

In particular, she hopes her work helps others embrace their culture sooner than she did.


"I don't want to be the face of what tradition is, but it is important for me to be a representation that helps ignite the younger generation."

Araujo says he is proud San Jose Walls has brought life to areas that had previously been neglected.

"The alley behind Camino Brewing used to be a mess," he says. However, after a wall in the alley was painted in the 2018 event, he claims "people take pride and clean it up."

The event has also brought street art to areas of San Jose where its presence was previously lacking. In 2019, San Jose Walls helped increase the number of murals on the city's sprawling south side significantly with nine new pieces.

Like Manuel, the organizers of SJ Walls are concerned with representation. This year, the series made a concerted effort to ensure that the artistic identities included represent the vast diversity found in San Jose.

"We were looking at our census and seeing what we curated and who was represented in those previous events," says Araujo. "We realized we could really use a lot more Asian American, especially Southeast Asian representation. And of course, women artists." 

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