

Cities U.S.A.

Austin's Weird and Wonderful Art

In a city rapidly changing with population growth, Austin's murals anchor the wonderfully 'weird' spirit that first helped make it a cultural oasis.



The University Co-op building's iconic "Austintatious" mural was painted in 1974. Photo By: Steve Lagreca/Shutterstock

BY Sharmistha Chaudhuri POSTED ON November 6, 2021

I stood with my back to the sage-coloured wall on a summer afternoon and stared ahead at the throng mentally preparing for their turn. No one would get more than a minute, and it would all come down to an impromptu yet choreographed dance that has become the norm with tourist spots in the age of social media—a jump, an embrace, a trusted pose—all for one synchronised shot in Austin's trendy SoCo (South Congress) neighbourhood. The draw? Tantalizing red spray paint that sashays across the exterior of Jo's Coffee in the cursive scrawl, "I love you so much."

It was created as an aerosol expression of love by a local musician to her partner, in 2010, who co-owns the coffee shop. The 10-minute handiwork became an overnight sensation, along with a mountain of merchandise inspired by the iconic mural, which has since seen its fair share of tourists and vandals interact with its quirky existence.

I moved to Austin just before the pandemic, making me part of the population growth that has seen a 34 per cent increase since the mural marking Jo's Coffee was painted. On average, Austin gains 184 residents daily. With Silicon Valley tech companies relocating here, real estate has skyrocketed. My very local realtor lamented she hardly recognised the university town Austin once was. Despite the high-rises, swanky commercialization, and a spanking new MLS team and stadium, I can't help but feel my quest to understand the city I'm living in is underlined by the pulse of its slogan—"Keep Austin Weird". An offhand comment on local radio in 2000 formed the tagline, and the phrase was quickly adopted by local businesses. But *what* makes Austin weird? The ethos is open to interpretation, unfettered by imagination. I say, the unbound public art plays a significant role; from simple to elaborate, the murals peppered throughout Austin make the city an unforgettable visual treat.

The Beginning

The first mural was commissioned by the University Baptist Church. The year was 1950 and the artist, Seymour Fogel, was a professor at the University of Texas who had apprenticed under Diego Rivera. Fogel's fresco-styled, vibrant swirling circles and orbs frame the doorway of Unity Baptist Church located just off The Drag, a student-friendly portion of Guadalupe St and an important cultural artery. The fresco, signifying a marriage of land, water, and heaven, portraying clasped hands in prayer below a white dove just above the church's doorway, initially caused an uproar. But the more people saw "Genesis," the more opinions were reconsidered, until it was finally embraced as Austinite art. It was the starting point for an outdoor artistic explosion to grip Austin in the coming decades.

Last year, the city government issued and extended stay-at-home orders for a considerable period. The vibe of the city was unlike what I had seen as a tourist—no live music or indoor dining, shutdown eateries, curbside pickups for essentials, and so on. The one permissible pastime I could do amid the global gloom was admire the ghost city's vibrant public art.

Fame and Glory

If you walk down The Drag to the University Co-op, your eyes will immediately peel towards the side wall on W 23rd. There lies a vibrant outdoor mural painted by three students in 1974. The paints were supplied by the Co-op, and inspiration had come from their proposed comic book called "Austintatious," after which the work was titled. Their creation spans an entire wall depicting Austin icons and landmarks in '70s technicolour. It gained instant fame and the Co-op bought the rights from the trio for \$1,000.

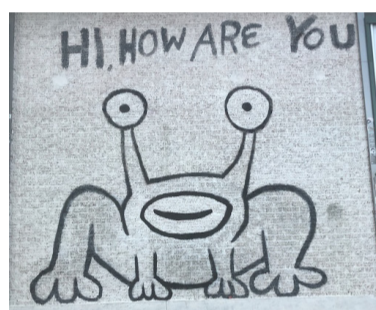
A street up, at the corner of Guadalupe and W 24th, lies a building that has changed many hands, yet the film-themed "Varsity Theatre" mural from four decades ago still stands. At least, one-third of it—12 frames and a full-body image of Jamaican actor and musician Jimmy Cliff. Walk down and turn right at W 21st to see "Jeremiah the Innocent." The words "Hi, How Are You?" hover over a wide-eyed frog. Commissioned in 1993, musician Daniel Johnston chose to paint a variation of his own album cover from 10 years ago on the bare wall. The words have truly embodied the spirit of the city, and since 2018, January 22nd has been declared Hi, How Are You Day by the City of Austin to encourage mental health support.



The Ice Cream mural (top) keeps Austin vibrant, while the Varsity Theatre (bottom) fresco keep its character alive. Photos By: Sharmistha Chaudhuri



After the iconic HOPE outdoor graffiti park closed its gates in 2018, a revamped park is set to open near the airport. Photo By: Nagel Photography/ Shutterstock



Clockwise from top: "Hi, How Are You?" at W 21st, George Floyd's portrait on E 4th, and "I love you so much" on South Congress Avenue are well-recognized spots in the city. Photos By: Sharmistha Chaudhuri

"Greetings from Austin," on S 1st, is a gigantic replica of a 1940s-style postcard paying homage to the city, and has been on every must-visit list since tour buses started pulling up to it in 1997. Then, there's "Willie For President" on SoCo. It debuted in 2016, just before South by Southwest music festival, to provide humour amid a tension-filled political atmosphere. But the '70s-style psychedelic portrait of Willie Nelson has stayed up long past the festival, a nod to the musician's long-lasting connection with Austin. Some say his performance here in 1972 was the birth of the modern Austin music scene.

Austin has many non-profits working with and for artists, in addition to various local government programmes like Art in Public Places (AIPP). When "Tau Ceti", commissioned by the AIPP, was revealed at the corner of E 2nd and Brazos (2018)—a 10-storeyed inverted colour gradient that refracts sunlight off surrounding buildings to create unique viewing experiences throughout the day—it was an instant hit. Historically, East Austin represented the culture and history of the city's African American community, but today is plagued by gentrification. Last year, after the death of George Floyd (whose tribute mural is on E 4th), a non-profit dedicated to promoting art in East Austin called upon artists and volunteers to create two murals—*Black Austin Matters* (Congress Avenue) and *Black Artists Matter* (E 11th)—of solid yellow lettering across asphalt roads.

We Belong

Since the genesis of Fogel's fresco, locals have come to truly embrace the colourful walls pigmented with a sense of community identity. And if an artwork is vandalised, threatened, or painted over, the people of Austin come forth as protectors. It took the demolition of an 80×20 foot mural called "Los Elementos" in 1981 to spark this sense of belonging, marking the loss as a threat to local communities. Since the erasure of "Los Elementos," community organising has helped preserve "Varsity Theatre" and "Hi, How Are You" in the hue of extensive citywide development.

When the mural at Givens Park (E 12th)—painted after the murder of beloved resident Andre Davis Jr, and depicting victims of gun violence and police brutality—was in jeopardy, the community rallied to save it. And even when the whitewashing of Austin's African American community moves too fast to initially halt, like the painting over of Chris Rogers's 2014 mural at E 12th by new proprietors, the rallying cry for cultural preservation does not easily give in to rapid gentrification. Visit the crossroad today to see what Rogers repainted—*We Rise*, a hopeful depiction of iconic faces.

It would be shortsighted to not mention the fate of HOPE outdoor graffiti park: an abandoned construction project that was cleaned and opened to the public near Downtown for mural painting in 2011, only to be closed eight years later after the land was sold to a developer. However, a revamped graffiti park is set to open in 2021 near the airport, almost two years in the works. Will it capture the spirit of the old site? We wait and watch.

Times have changed since 1950, yet there is always a buzz at the hint of a new mural or updating of older ones. After the original "La Lotería" (E Cesar Chavez) was ruined, it was repainted, with the wonderful addition of the singer Selena. "Austintatious" has been revamped numerous times with celebrity icons like Michael Dell and Matthew McConaughey; however, not always is the subject matter excepted—for example, a tribute to Kobe Bryant at Guadalupe St was celebrated by fans but defaced soon after.

Personally, Austin's street art has been a revelation, helping me understand the sense and history of the city. The art is ever-evolving, much like Austin. With 'normalcy' returning, tourists have started to visit, if the crowds at SoCo and Downtown are any indication. The sage wall at Jo's Coffee brought back memories on a recent, sunny afternoon. I had last visited it some years ago. It had been the day after my partner had proposed, so it had seemed fitting to embrace in front of the red scrawl. I grinned at the memory. Then, embracing my partner, I smiled at my phone in the steady hands of a stranger ahead. This new photo wouldn't be that different after all, except for some new pounds and grey strands.

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The 70s-style psychedelic portrait of Willie Nelson sits on SoCo, while murals with warm greetings sprawl across the city. Photos By: Sharmistha Chaudhuri

ESSENTIALS



You're My Butter Half (E Martin Luther King Blvd)—One of Austin's most lovable and photographed murals.

Bob Dylan (2583 Guadalupe St)—A music legend on the wall of The Hole in the Wall, an old Austin live music club.

Be Well (N Lamar Blvd and 5th St)—10,000 sq. ft. of an underpass. It was created by six artists impacted by the pandemic to spread positivity amid the gloom.

Wonder Woman (111 E Cesar Chavez St)—Not under the radar, but new. The DC character breaking chains celebrates the centenary of the 19th amendment that gave women the right to vote.

Heart Austin (5134 Burnet Rd)—The combination of red, white, and black reminds me of the Parle Kismi toffee packaging.



Sharmistha Chaudhuri is an independent writer currently based in Austin, Texas. When she's not planning trips, she is experimenting with flavours from her travels in her kitchen. She posts her journey on Instagram at @sharmi86

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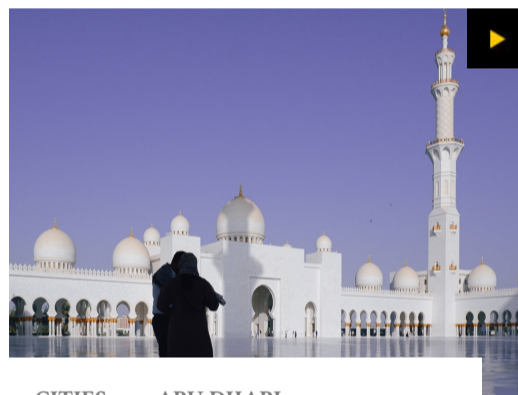
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