

Graffiti-Covered Wynwood Is Quickly Becoming Miami's Hippest New Neighborhood



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[Debra A. Klein](#)

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South Beach may host the main Art Basel events, but artists are flocking to Miami's up-and-coming Wynwood neighborhood, with its galleries, street art, and people watching.

In the neon Day-Glo 1980s—when Miami's South Beach patios were cluttered with grandmas in rockers, not models with slamming bodies, and the only place to eat on Ocean Drive was the cheerful but not at all chic News Café—Wynwood, north of downtown, was where you'd go to buy a cutting-edge *Miami Vice* white sofa. And you'd do it fast. No amount of shoulder pad heft could protect you in this less-than-safe place.

One of the first art dealers in the neighborhood at the time, Barbara Gillman, recalls not just dealing in *objets d'art*, but with real objects, thrown as projectiles through her gallery windows. (She left.)

Although from the outside, parts of Wynwood still resemble Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks"—darkness surrounding a lonely, low-slung diner, a corner wedge of light the only proof of life—inside, instead of cheap barstools and a soda jerk, you might find a waiter delivering tapas or a bearded barista serving organic coffee. And instead of world-weary businessmen, you'll find late 20-somethings electrified by the latest mural they just snapped on their iPhones, planning their next foray.

Wynwood is made up of wide blocks of warehouses with little street traffic that are still larded with dicey alleyways. But in some instances, when you peek down them, you may see a bright dragon mural and the curved fronds of a donkey palm rising over an abandoned lot, creating that magical alchemy of desolation and serendipity that makes you feel you're discovering the next big thing. Enjoy the illusion.

The area was planned by developer Tony Goldman, credited with transforming South Beach. He had a vision for this Eliza Doolittle of neighborhoods, too. Following his death in 2012, neighborhood businesses, his offspring, and the arts community are fulfilling his vision. There's even a 10-year improvement plan.

During Art Basel, Wynwood's offerings, unlike South Beach's billionaire catnip, feel accessible, a destination for peering at "street" art and leering at people—the crowd that didn't arrive in town by Lear jet.

Here, where it's legal to tag buildings in the daylight—with the owner's permission, of course—the graffiti's intense color, exuberance, and creativity are arresting. The neighborhood's block-long warehouses are saturated with art, one of the largest collections of outdoor murals anywhere. And for the past week or so, artists dressed as though they are expecting a chemical weapons attack have been spray-painting old warehouse walls with abandon.

The heart of Wynwood is the strip of NW 2nd Avenue between 23rd and 28th streets, just a paint splatter away from the zebra-striped Wynwood Building, a local landmark painted by Joseph Dzwill and located nearby on NW 3rd Avenue. A few blocks away, you'll find an artistic oxymoron, the Wynwood Walls, which is both an open space for muralists and a sort of gated community. Visitors can feel edgy, yet still be safe. Being inside is like a visit to a Willy Wonka Chocolate Factory of art: overwhelming, whimsical, and otherworldly.

For Art Basel novices, Wynwood's intimate galleries and opportunity to chat with the artists are the perfect amuse-bouche before the multi-course, dizzying art shows up the street.

For Basel, the Wynwood Walls' *Women on the Walls* exhibit includes new works by "established" graffiti artists and international newcomers. Japan's Aiko created the Goddess of

Wynwood as an expression of girl power. “I’m a tiny Japanese lady,” she quietly explains from her scaffolding, “but inside I have huge power.” Her mural is scattered with pandas, flowers, and butterflies, superimposed on a woman in an indelicate pose. Just outside the gates and a few streets down, at 22nd street, South African Faith47’s glittering gold woman supplicates herself, offering pearls toward a beam of gold, yet she dominates in sheer size what might be the tallest surface in the area. She’s already stopping traffic.

It's easy to find yourself over indulging in the Wynwood Walls, and that’s even before you leave the grounds and discover French artist Kashink’s “50 Cakes of Gay”: two walls of greeting card-colored wedding cakes.

To help visitors find the dozens of other murals in the neighborhood, Miami natives Robert de los Rios and Christopher Montano created the two-month-old wynwoodmap.com interactive website. (Unfortunately, only art is on it, not “no go” streets.) Montano says they wanted the site to capture the ephemeral, eerily foreshadowing last month’s [5 Pointz whitewash in Queens](#). “Street art is about change,” he says. “Once a piece is gone, it’s gone forever.” They hope their site centralizes the works and serves as an archive once they’re gone.

Fortunately, in Wynwood, murals stay up for months, even years.

Bleeding out along NW 2nd Avenue like paint that seeped past a masking-tape border are ribbons of galleries where it’s still possible to chat with the owners and artists about shape and form, not just bottom lines. Inside Collection Privee Gallery, painted cast-aluminum men are on the walls, climbing up the series of small sculptures by Bill Starke, each called “Climber.” Nearby at The Screening Room, the walls come crumbling down in “Time of the Empress,” an installation whose white rectangular screens glow like perfect teeth in the multimedia gallery. The Aziz + Cucher animation project depicts buildings disintegrating in what you might imagine as an invisible intake tube of a juicer, on seven flat panels. Think high-tech sand castles that fizzle into black dots, but instead of a day at the beach, they immediately evoke 9/11, a connection the artists say was unintentional.

Up the block, you can forgive yourself for thinking Emmett Moore’s neon glasses, titled “Since You Broke My Heart,” on the exterior wall of Gallery Diet, aren’t working. What they aren’t is neon. Moore says his metal artworks echo familiar Miami neon silhouettes but don’t light up, to reflect the “melancholy” and the reality behind the façade.

Just around the corner, Cuban artist Sandra Ramos’s private visions are set in two startling eyes rimmed with her memories at TUB Gallery.

When your visual disc space is full to overflowing, try some ear candy, although you might not find its tones that sweet. During Basel, the electronic techno music duo Darkside is scheduled to headline at Mana Wynwood Sound Studio’s three-day festival. (*Thursday, [December 5](#), Mana Wynwood, 318 NW 23rd Ave.*)

In a neighborhood that’s more a feast for the eyes, dining options are limited, but there are a couple of choices right on or near the main street. No one leaves Wynwood without admiring

David Benjamin Sherry's multi-colored, striped sculpture that looks like your favorite pair of knee-highs covering a man in the window of Wynwood Café, which backs into Wynwood Walls. Panther Coffee's light fare will tide you over until dinnertime back at the beach. Neighborhood newcomer The Butcher Shop looks like what might happen if a meat slicer inherited a fortune but didn't want to give up his day job: an attractively lit grocery store meat counter set inside an indoor/outdoor airy sports bar, with a leafy street side beer garden outside. Meats are grilled to order or wrapped raw to go.

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