

Mural madness: St. Petersburg's street art is a trip

Hot spot's scenes range from earthy to spacey

By Robin Soslow

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Photo: Robin Soslow

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This huge mural, named Space Rainbows, was painted by California artist Ricky Watts on the Sage Building in St. Petersburg's Central Arts District.

You never know whom you'll run into in St. Petersburg, Fla. Ambling through an alley in the Central Arts District, I spotted 1960s fashion model Twiggy, her huge eyes peering from a wall.

St. Pete's famously beautiful Gulf Coast beach and bay sunsets are no longer the Tampa-area town's only dazzling sights. The Salvador Dali Museum and Chihuly Collection have achieved world-class stature; Morean Arts Center, the Museum of Fine Arts and Florida CraftArt Gallery draw global buzz. Sensational works brighten unexpected places, such as Chihuly glass spectacles at the Vinoy Renaissance, the pink bayside resort opened in 1925.

Recently, art has overflowed onto outdoor walls, attracting mural fans and top street artists to St. Pete.

For backstories, join guided Saturday-morning walking tours that start at Florida CraftArt in the Central Arts District, now a hotbed of chef-driven restaurants and brewpubs. Or get a map at the gallery and wander solo by foot or on the new Central Avenue Trolley, which runs frequently and costs \$5 for a day pass.

The murals showcase both locally based and international talent. Perhaps the most prolific is Sebastian Coolidge, whose subjects include bicycling animal figures, a bicycling beer-chasing hipster, a wolf parable and a long-armed boy squeezing an orange. Coolidge's collaborations with other local artists include a depiction of TV nerd Urkel eating ice cream beside a horse and mystic.

Zen-inducing scenes give way to graphics that sizzle with the ferocity of a cat fight. Dark dramas are counterbalanced by the likes of "You Are My Sunshine," a Jeffrey Sincich/Josh Stover collaboration radiating from Morean Arts Center's wall.

Kooky kinetic murals by Greg Mike include blocky "Mr Loudmouth and friends" on The Bends dive-bar building, one of many pieces created last September during St. Pete's SHINE mural festival.

In the Central Arts District's mural-jammed alley, a shark swims across the side of State Theatre. This popular selfie backdrop is by Shark Toof, a Los Angeles graffiti artist.

Nearby, interlocking color-forms shimmer top to bottom on a massive wall. "Space Rainbows" was designed by Ricky Watts, a Northern California graffiti master. Watts worked freehand using 500 cans of spray paint, said tour guide Chad Mize, who painted Twiggy and a cheeky update of St. Pete's 1950s Mr. Sun tourism logo.

Realism makes Miami-based Evoca1's supersize "Girl With Doberman" jump off the side of Furnish Me Vintage. Other global muralists with works in town include BASK (Faces), Hoxxoh (trippy hypnotic waves), Erik Jones (futuristic females) and Tes ONE and Pale Horse (the fearsome "Snake Woman").

Women are well-represented. Jennifer Kosharek's the force behind alley depictions of Frida Kahlo and dolls bobbing in surreal settings. Sarah Sheppard's "Life Reimagined" unfolds dreams. Carrie Jadus' superb homage to inventor Nikola Tesla graces Genius Central's headquarters. Kelly Hewitt's gigantic Melodious Monster artscape animates Hyppo Gourmet's new ice-pop shop.

For more amusing scenes, go west to the Grand Central District for Andrew Speer's flying pink elephants. Look for the pulsing yellow vintage-style quack-remedy ads of "Morning Breath," created by Doug Cunningham and Jason Noto. These Grammy Award-winning package designers' clients include top sneaker brands and Beats By Dre.

The Vitale Bros. have animated a Warehouse Arts District wall with exquisitely rendered sea turtles and dolphins. The locally beloved duo's other murals include huge images of smiling children's heads. They also help visiting muralists execute time-consuming detailed designs.

Thirsty? You can't miss new Cage Brewery - since Danial Ryan illustrated the exterior with absurd acrobatic cats.