



# New Mexico



THE MAGAZINE FOR AAA MEMBERS

## JOURNEY

## Art on the Edge

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Albuquerque's  
graffiti scene

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**The LA Underground** The wall of this hip-hop shop represents pure graffiti, with tags and personal information of three artists incorporated into the design. One of the artists was John Lorne, a.k.a. Slipkid, who also paints wall murals on commission. These works are a good example of the ephemeral nature of graffiti; none of the artists considers the work to be permanent, so you might see different art here, depending on how often you visit.  
2000 Central Avenue SE

# The Writing on the Walls

**Graffiti artists are making their mark on Albuquerque's art scene**

STORY BY NEALA SCHWARTZBERG • PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE LARESE

If you look around Central Avenue in Albuquerque, you're likely to see graffiti. But these walls aren't covered with "tags," or illegally sprayed aerosol markings. Here, from downtown through the university area and into trendy Nob Hill, graffiti artists are celebrated and even commissioned to use buildings as canvases to showcase their edgy art.

"Graffiti is definitely a form of art," says Suzanne Sbarge, executive director of 516 ARTS, an innovative, nonprofit gallery in downtown Albuquerque.

And it's come a long way from its controversial roots on subway trains and city walls. Graffiti art is usually created with spray paint and is most often a highly stylized form of calligraphy that incorporates tags (the artist's street name) as the basis of the images. Unlike murals, which are usually commissioned images on public spaces, graffiti art is often created "guerilla style," says Sbarge, and is removed quickly. But as more graffiti artists create sanctioned art, the mural

and graffiti genres increasingly overlap—and the art sticks around longer.

"Crucial to graffiti art as well as other art forms is the artist's intention, concept, and craft," says Sbarge, who was project director of Albuquerque's 2010 Street Arts: A Celebration of Hip-Hop Culture and Free Expression. Led by 516 ARTS, the festival drew graffiti artists and muralists from around the world, and in its wake, left a trail of vibrant colors in Albuquerque. Some of the artists created murals commissioned for the festival, while others joined local street and graffiti muralists to add new works to the city walls, just for the pleasure of creating it.

Artists such as Southern California-based Chaz Bojórquez, who painted a large mural for the festival's exhibit, have "spent a lifetime perfecting the art of calligraphic graffiti," Sbarge says. He and others have helped legitimize graffiti by taking it "inside."

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>>> "Galleries would tell me that it would ruin their fine art reputation if they showed 'children's work,'" Bojórquez says. "But to say 'graffiti is art' does not make it so; I had to prove it. Real graffiti is 'outside' in the streets, but this forced me to paint my graffiti on canvas to prove my artistic skills. My work had to look like art to finally be understood as art."

This concept has certainly worked for Bojórquez, whose pieces are part of the permanent collections of Albuquerque's National Hispanic Cultural Center and the Smithsonian, proving, he says, that there is no more question of "Is graffiti art?"

But the best way to experience these elaborately conceived and executed images is to see them in their native space. You can introduce yourself to this graphical world by cruising the three-mile stretch of former Route 66 on Central Avenue between the downtown and Nob Hill neighborhoods, home to one of the most colorful and diverse concentrations of graffiti art in the state.

## 516 ARTS

This is a good place to begin a tour and to learn about the street muralists and graffiti artists. The colorful murals by Thomas Christopher Haag on the entrance wall of 516 ARTS (516arts.org), as well as his work on the walls of other Albuquerque buildings, are classified as street art murals. "But they have the colorful street-art-style vibrancy of graffiti around the world," Sbarge says. **516 Central Avenue SW**



Suzanne Sbarge



Quip

## HVIC Theatre Building

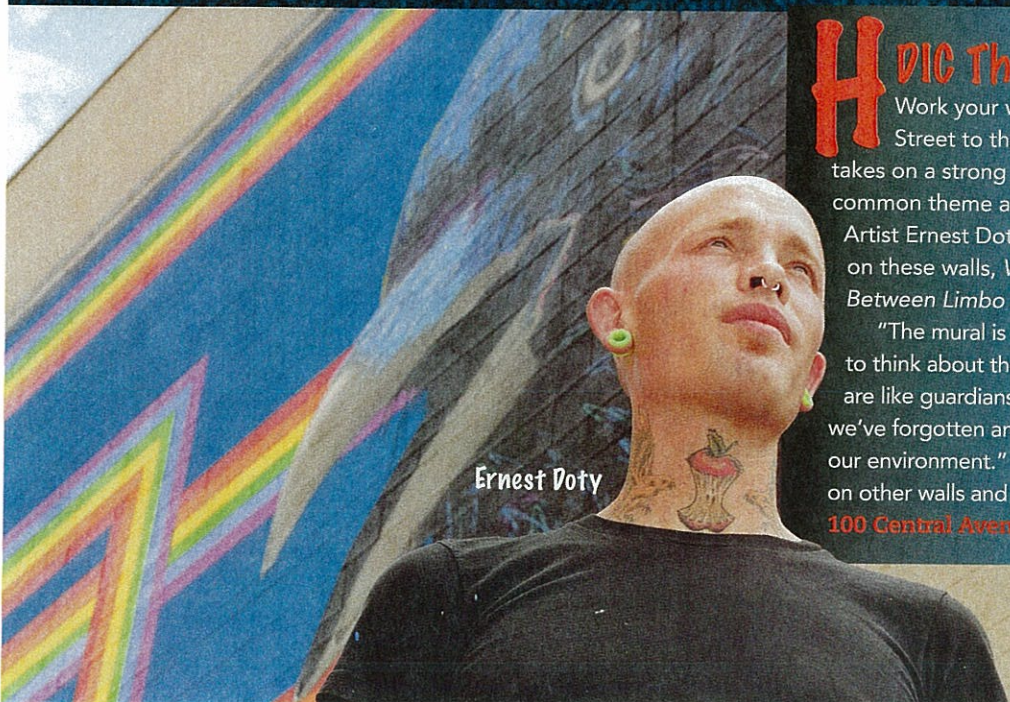
Work your way east toward Nob Hill Street to this building, where the art takes on a strong social-activist tone, a common theme among graffiti muralists.

Artist Ernest Doty calls the mural he painted on these walls, *We Exist Somewhere Between Limbo and Purgatory*.

"The mural is meant to inspire people and to think about the sky," Doty says. "The birds are like guardians—they know something we've forgotten and help us to reconnect to our environment." Doty's work also appears on other walls and in local art galleries.

**100 Central Avenue SW at Second Street**

Ernest Doty







## Lobo Men's Shop

The beautifully executed murals and graffiti on the back wall of this building represent a collaborative effort between an artist known as Silkroy and three other artists.

David Sanchez gave permission for the painting of the shop's wall and was delighted with the murals. "I had people stopping and taking pictures," he says. "Everyone loved it." When another reputable artist asked if he could paint a mural, Sanchez readily agreed. "If you allow them the time and give them a place, they can create something beautiful," he says. **2120 Central Avenue SE**

Joseph Sullivan



## Garage

This graffiti mural by artist Joseph Sullivan has the unusual quality of being painted on the corner of the building. It also incorporates the work of Quip, a local female graffiti artist, who created the faces of the two women. "Quip was included because I wanted to bring in an up-and-coming artist," Sullivan says. "I know that the females in this subculture can have a more difficult time integrating into the machismo of the graffiti world." This mural also incorporates a nod to the building's owner. "He gave me permission to use the walls, but he did request certain inclusions," Sullivan says. "He wanted a portrait of his original-condition Chevy Impala that he purchased more than 60 years ago." 🌀

**Between 3903 and 3907 Central NE**

*Neala Schwartzberg is an Albuquerque-based freelance writer.*