

LIFE & ARTS

CULTURE

Art Scenes Off the Beaten Track

Beyond New York, America's smaller cities like Santa Fe and Palm Springs sustain their own cultural 'microclimates'

BY KELLY CROW

AS THE FALL SEASON gets under way, attention tends to focus on major cities like New York and London because of their blockbuster museum exhibits and trophy-art auctions. The vagaries of the art market hold greater sway there, with galleries opening and closing with every tilt in collector confidence. Yet beyond these global hubs, there exist smaller, self-sustaining art scenes that appear to thrive in good markets and bad. Santa Fe, N.M., is one such "microclimate." Aspen, Colo., is another.

Some hot spots, like Palm Springs, Calif., benefit from vacation-worthy vistas or cheery climates, but other settings may come as a surprise. Arts researcher Zannie Giraud Voss, who directs the DataArts team at Southern Methodist University, said its latest index of culturally vibrant cities includes places like Traverse City, Mich., population 15,532.

Traverse City sits a few miles away from the Interlochen Center for the Arts, and it boasts a film festival, symphony orchestra and a museum with one of the world's top collections of Inuit art. Rapid City, S.D., also made the Arts Vibrancy Index in part because it is close to Mount Rushmore.

"People are searching for the authentic," Ms. Voss said. "They want to feel like they've gone somewhere specific."

Kristiaan Villola, director of Santa Fe's Museum of International Folk Art, said the city's artists and collectors no longer feel compelled to travel to either coast to feel like they've participated in a lively art season—a departure from perceptions a generation ago, he said. The hometown focus buffers some galleries from the swings of the broader art markets, but it also allows regional styles and quirks to blossom.

"We don't really even need the bigger art world," Mr. Villola added. "Here in Santa Fe, we create our own weather."

Here is a look at five cities that have cultivated their own artistic identities.



Aspen, Colo.

Known For: This former silver-mining boomtown is now a playground for the world's top collectors, so the trading-post shops are steadily making way for galleries like Baldwin, Marianne Boesky and Casterline Goodman. Young upstart Skye Gallery just offered a plant-forging hike with one of its artists.

Must-See: After three decades of squeezing

contemporary-art shows into a former power plant, the Aspen Art Museum tripled its footprint when it opened in a new home designed by Pritzker Architecture Prize winner Shigeru Ban. Director Heidi Zuckerman has works up by artists like Yto Barrada and Larry Bell.

Local Hero: Soaring real-estate prices keep most working artists from settling here, but Texas-born James Surls has a studio in nearby Carbondale.

More than 50 of his works are on view through Sept. 29 at the Southern Utah Museum of Art.

Insider Tip: Collector Eleanor De Sole sent her summer visitors to ride a gondola in nearby Snowmass up to the Elk Camp restaurant to see Sarah Cain's installation, "Mountain Song," through Sept. 30. Ms. De Sole also recommends "the world's best collection of Jasper Johns's works on paper" at the Powers Art Center in Carbondale.

Kansas City, Mo.

Known For: This city is beloved for its jazz and barbecue, but Thomas Hart Benton and Robert Morris lived here, and the Kansas City Art Institute's ceramics program has spurred collectors to pay as much for pottery as they might a painting. Longtime dealer Sherry Leedy said she no longer shows at far-flung fairs because her existing supporters can sustain her artists' careers.

Must-See: Kansas City has a population of almost 500,000, coincidentally around the number of annual visitors to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. The museum is prized for its Caravaggio, "Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness," as well as its edgy contemporary shows. Up now: Exhibits on Missouri natives Wendell Castle and Wilbur Niewald.

Local Hero: Kansas City-born artist Andrzej Zieliński explores the ways machinery can make people anxious by re-creating copiers, paper shredders and other gadgets using warped sheets of translucent plastic. His "Indoor Habitat" show is up through Oct. 2 at Emporia State University.

Insider Tip: Kansas City launched a biennial, "Open Spaces," with 46 artists—half from the region. Collector Bill Goutreaux recommends Ebony Patterson's "...called up," an abandoned pool that the artist cleaned up and festooned with flowers, and Kansas City Art Institute alum Nick Cave's "Hy-Dive" installation in a former Catholic church.



Santa Fe, N.M.

Known For: Indigenous and Hispanic artists settled here long before Georgia O'Keeffe, and today it brims with at least 100 galleries, eight museums and seasonal market events.

Must-See: After two decades overseeing a biennial and an art space, SITE Santa Fe opened a renovated and expanded venue in the trendy Rail-yards district. Its latest "SITElines" biennial is up through Jan. 6, showing works like Hock E. Aye Vi Edgar's "Heap of Birds" eerie wordplay prints, "Surviving Active Shooter Custer." Another hit in town: Artist collective Meow Wolf's trippy funhouse installation, "House of Eternal Return."

Local Hero: Cannupa Hanska Luger was born on North Dakota's Standing Rock reservation, but he lives in Santa Fe and makes pieces like "Every One," made from clay beads representing missing or murdered indigenous women. Strung together, the beads reveal a portrait of one Native woman.

Insider Tip: Former Sotheby's chairman John Marion and his wife, Anne, bought a home in Santa Fe in the 1990s, helped found the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in 1997 and recommend strolling the galleries along Canyon Road. Hungry? Eclectic American restaurant Geronimo "puts Tex-Mex to shame," Mr. Marion said.



Charleston, S.C.

Known For: This port city has long weathered its share of tempests and rolling history, from its antebellum days with painters like Thomas Sully and James Audubon to a 1930s "Porgy and Bess"-style revival of Lowcountry romanticism. Yet edgy undercurrents persist in the work of graffiti artist Shepard Fairey and conceptual artist Charles Gaines, both born here.

Must-See: The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art is a noncollecting powerhouse anchored at the College of Charleston and known for championing nontraditional artists like Washington, D.C.'s Renee Stout. It is currently exhibiting Italian painter Hines, who retraced Audubon's steps in the U.S. and painted watercolor views of birds he spotted along the way.

Local Hero: The Southern has done much to rally broader support for the incendiary work of Charleston-based Colin Quashie, who painted retired Gen. Colin Powell's face onto boxes of Uncle Ben's rice and re-designed toile wallpaper to reflect the brutal realities of slavery. Another rising star: Fletcher Williams III, whose work uses palmetto roses to explore black entrepreneurship and ingenuity, he said.

Insider Tip: Mark Sloan, the Halsey's director and chief curator, recommends stopping by the emerging-art exhibitions and artist studios at the Redux Contemporary Art Center. "The technology executives moving into Charleston now are adventurous, and they're more into emerging art than marsh scenes," Mr. Sloan said.

Palm Springs, Calif.

Known For: Hollywood stars like Bob Hope began wintering in this desert town in the shadow of Mount San Jacinto in the 1930s. He was followed by Frank Sinatra and another Rat Pack wave after World War II, transforming Palm Springs into a "mecca for midcentury modernity," said Charles Phoenix, author of "Addicted to America: Celebrating Classic & Kitschy American Life & Style."

Must-See: More than 125,000 people descend in "Mad Men" attire and 1950s Cadillacs every February for Modernism Week, a bonanza of vintage furniture fairs and double-decker bus tours of the time-warped neighborhoods designed by architects like Albert Frey. (There's also a smaller preview version Oct. 18-21.)

Local Hero: Architect Hugh Kaptur was a young apprentice during Palm Springs' midcentury heyday, but he stuck around, designed homes for actors Steve McQueen and William Holden and at age 87 is still renovating his buildings and designing new ones today.

Insider Tip: Mr. Phoenix and Lisa Vossler Smith, Modernism Week's executive director, said visitors should get outfitted in country-club attire at Trina Turk's boutique before loading up on Peninsula Pastries ("It helps offset the cocktails," Mr. Phoenix said). Brush up on midcentury everything at the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center—or step into a primer by visiting Walter Annenberg's 200-acre winter estate, known as Sunnylands, in nearby Rancho Mirage.

