

# HYPERALLERGIC

ARTICLES

## The Hundreds of Artists Living in LA's Skid Row

Since 2008, the Los Angeles Poverty Department has been organizing a registry of artists who live and work in the neighborhood, which now includes more than 700 names.



Noni Brynjolson 9 hours ago



Portraits of artists included in the registry in *State of the ART* at the Skid Row History Museum & Archive (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

LOS ANGELES — Right next to LA's Arts District, with its galleries, condos, breweries, and coffee shops, is a different kind of arts community. Thousands of homeless people live in Skid Row, and many of them identify as artists. In 2008, the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) began to organize a registry of artists who live and work in the neighborhood, which now includes more than 700 names.

130 of these artists are represented in portraits, posters, and videos in the exhibition *State of the ART* at the Skid Row History Museum & Archive, an art space curated by LAPD.

*State of the ART* reflects on the past 10 years of art making in Skid Row. In

2008, LAPD partnered with Americans for the Arts on a study titled [“Making the Case for Skid Row Culture.”](#) The study involved an inventory of art practices in the neighborhood, which has been continuously added to and updated since then. Artists sign up for the registry when they attend events or workshops through LAPD. Since forming in 1985, the organization has offered theater and performance workshops in Skid Row, while other groups provide art studio space, creative writing workshops, and access to musical instruments. One of LAPD’s most popular events, which brings these various practices together, is the [Festival for All Skid Row Artists.](#)



Calendar of cultural events in Skid Row, organized by the Los Angeles Poverty Department and other organizations, in the exhibition *State of the ART*, at the Skid Row History Museum & Archive (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Video showing footage of one of the Festivals for All Skid Row Artists, included in the exhibition *State of the ART* at the Skid Row History Museum & Archive (photo courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department)

The ninth iteration of the festival was held over the weekend of November 3rd in San Julian Park and featured musical performances, visual art displays, and workshops. To get there from my car, I walked past missions and SROs, piles of personal belongings, and dozens of tents, aware that I was only a few blocks away from a stark dividing line that separates Skid Row from the Arts District, where a typical Saturday might involve mural selfies and artisanal ice cream. This boundary is a visible manifestation of the containment policy that has turned Skid Row into an area that warehouses the poor and homeless. However, LAPD artistic director John Malpede told me that “the policy backfired in the sense that it created a low-income neighborhood that possesses an increasing self-identity and sense of community.” He pointed

out that most residents who do end up moving out of Skid Row return to visit friends, volunteer, or start their own initiatives.



Performance by the Urban Voices Project at the 9th Annual Festival for All Skid Row Artists in San Julian Park (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

At the festival, I met some of the artists included in the registry. Kaniah, 19, invents animé-inspired characters and paints them in acrylic. She's been attending the event for eight years and keeps coming back because she likes how it "brings the community together." An artist named Diane was showing her work at the festival for the first time and was interested in meeting other artists and getting exposure for her

work. One of her paintings depicted a sharp-toothed, blue-faced Trump, surrounded by a cacophonous word cloud of news headlines, slogans, and tweets ("no collusion/shithole countries/fake news/fusion gps/caged kids," etc.).

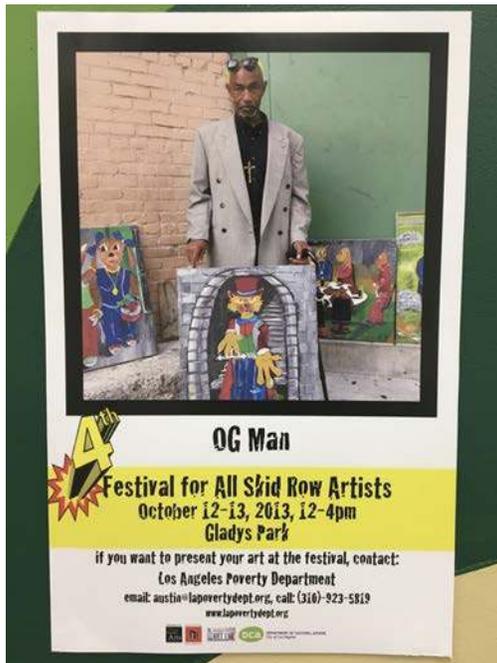
Hayk Makhmuryan, who runs Studio 526, an art space for Skid Row residents, spoke to me about the importance of supporting cultural production in the neighborhood. He thinks that initiatives like Studio 526 and LAPD are essential, because they "encourage people to come together around common interests and build common connections." Over the past several years he has noticed a growing awareness that homelessness does not happen in a vacuum. He said that while Skid Row used to be treated as its own separate issue, even by housing activists, it is increasingly viewed as part of the same conversation on housing unaffordability.

According to Makhmuryan, one of the main issues faced by activists and residents in Skid Row is how to make improvements without causing displacement. This is a central concern for LAPD as well. They have advocated for increased services and permanent supportive housing and have criticized the city's [DTLA 2040 plan](#) for replacing affordable housing with market-rate development. Attempts by LAPD and a coalition of other organizations to create a Skid Row neighborhood council were blocked last year by downtown power brokers (the conflict was documented in detail in the exhibition [Zillionaires Against Humanity](#)).



*State of the ART* installation shot (photo courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department)

While portraits make up a major component of *State of the ART*, they differ from more conventional representations of homeless people as passive subjects. Instead, they are shown as artists engaged in their work. I was reminded of the portraiture convention in which the sitter holds an item symbolizing their identity, such as a [paintbrush](#), [lute](#), or [globe](#). Here, they are playing guitars, holding microphones or dancing. In one portrait, 'OG Man' looks directly at the camera, in between paintings of cartoonish cats and dogs reminiscent of Louis Wain.



Poster with portrait of OG Man included in *State of the ART* at the Skid Row History Museum & Archive (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

In *State of the ART*, we are invited to look at portraits as more than representations of individuals who may be homeless. Instead, the hundreds of artists included in LAPD's registry are shown as active members of an arts community, who have also become part of a broader struggle for housing justice in Los Angeles and beyond.

*State of the ART continues at the Skid Row History Museum & Archive (250 S. Broadway, Los Angeles) through December 29.*

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