

The birth of the cool (El Segundo Art Walk)



The committee behind the El Segundo Art Walk, from left to right: Michelle Guidi, Michael Schreiber, Holly Socrates, Josette Murphy, Dani Brubaker, and George Renfro. Photo by Tamara Muth-King

by **Mark McDermott**

If the annals of El Segundo are ever compiled and some future scribe investigates the exact moment when the little seaside city named after Standard Oil's second refinery reached a definitive tipping point towards cool, he or she will discover it happened on the third Thursday of June in the year 2015. It then ratcheted up each of the next two third Thursdays of that same summer.

This was when the El Segundo Art Walk arrived, and with it a realization that El Segundo had more creativity per square foot than any other city in the region. Unexpected spectacles popped up throughout the city's downtown and adjacent Smoky Hollow warehouse district, including vibrant, often edgy paintings, surf art, exquisite photography, sculpture, music,

aerial performers, and moonshine purveyors. The range of the art walk's 29 venues was also a revelation, including MotoArt, the exuberantly unconventional business steeped in the deep heart of El Segundo's past, present, and future, making artful, functional furniture out of vintage aircraft parts; Copper Willow Printing Company, a little shop filled with vintage, hand-powered printing machines; Tyler Surfboards, founded by local legend Tyler Hatzikian, globally famed for his throwback "advanced vintage" style; the El Segundo Museum of Art, the unexpectedly cutting-edge museum with an international mien and a wildly experimental bent; and South Bay Customs, the American motorcycle shop whose ethos is aptly summed up as "Music, Art, Motors" and which possesses the mysterious sheen of an alternate universe born of rock 'n' roll and combustion engines.

But if the art walk emanated from any one place, it was the Holly Socrates Gallery, a little art whose arrival on Main Street two years ago was a harbinger of things to come.

Socrates is an artist originally from Maryland who has lived in Manhattan Beach for twenty years and seven years ago, after leaving a career in fashion, started showing her paintings at local art fairs. Her artwork — beautiful, unusual work, ranging from abstract oceanic acrylic canvases to charcoal (and coffee) portraits of wildlife possessing the exactitude of natural history somehow fused with an almost Eastern sense of spiritual serenity — quickly found a market. As Socrates was working to open her gallery in El Segundo, folks from neighboring businesses kept stopping by to welcome her to town.

"As I met more and more business owners, I realized everybody had some really interesting things they were doing," she recalled.

It occurred to her that El Segundo would be perfect for an art walk. She reached out to a dozen other businesses, pitching the idea.

"I figured if the response was lukewarm I'd just run off with my tail between my legs," she said.

Instead, the response was uniformly and emphatically in support of the idea.

"Then I was like, 'Great! Who is in charge? Oh, I'm in charge — with all these amazing people expecting something great,'" she said, laughing. "Then after a lot of blood, sweat, and tears, all these amazing people came together to build the art walk, making it up as we went along. And it just kind of snowballed."

A buzz emanated from the very outset. An estimated 400 people came to the first event. Through word-of-mouth alone — there was no budget for advertising, as the event was funded by the businesses themselves, on a shoestring — it doubled to 800 people on the third Thursday of July, and somewhere near double that again in August.

"Out of all the South Bay, if any place is that cultural, artistic beach city, it's El Segundo," Socrates said. "It has that warehouse artist feel to it. It was just a matter of shedding light on it."

Among those involved from the beginning was Michael Schreiber, the owner of South Bay Customs. When he and his partner, Robin Holden, arrived in Smoky Hollow nine years ago, it was a sleepy area, still largely industrial. But with each passing year, more creative

businesses arrived and a creative awakening occurred. By the time fashion photographer Dani Brubaker opened up Smoky Hollow Studios — a strikingly gorgeous, rustic, somehow holy, sprawling event space and photo shoot studio — opened in 2011, a flowering was officially underway.

When Socrates approached Schreiber about starting the art walk, he jumped out of his skin.

“The f***ing timing is perfect,” he said. “The timing is rad. The city has to do this.”

Up on Richmond Street, Josette Murphy had established About: Space, an interior design firm, 15 years ago, specializing in the creative use of space as an alternative to the teardowns that have so quickly and drastically changed the hometown feel of the Beach Cities. Her husband, Jean-Louis Boudreau, does custom cabinetry and other woodworking and is a general contractor, as well as a guitar player and singer and hockey player; the couple, who have two kids, often collaborate.

The idea of an artwalk immediately resonated with Murphy.

“Holly is not from here — it’s funny, it took an outsider to say, ‘There is nothing missing here. You have everything. Let’s ride the wave,’” she said. “It was right under our nose, but to all of us who live here, you kind of are in a bubble...And Holly has this purity of vision, because she’s not motivated by other interests, like business, or real estate. That set the tone.”

A key decision took place at a very early meeting regarding the art walk: artists would not be charged to show their work, as is the common practice at most art fairs and art walks.

“There’s a reason the term ‘starving artist’ exists,” Socrates said. “You don’t hear about starving cardiologists.”

Schreiber remembers an early meeting at which he slammed his palm on a table to emphatically declare there’d be no fee for artists, only to find there was absolutely no resistance to the idea.

“There is no way you can charge artists. Without them, this would be nothing,” he said. “You need to treat them like the stars of the show, because they are.”

In the early evening of the first art walk last June, everything was in place, but the question lingered: they’d built an art walk, but would people come?

“There’s always that ‘Carrie’ syndrome — you throw a party, someone dumps pig’s blood on your head, and no one shows up,” Schreiber said. “But it wasn’t that. It hit its mark.”





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SBCustoms
The El Segundo Art Walk at South Bay Customs

Carrie Dietz-Brown, an artist who grew up in neighboring Manhattan Beach and has lived in some of LA's hipper locales and showed art in all too many decidedly unhip art fairs, felt something different in the air from that first night, when she showed her art at Copper Willow Printing.

"I was thoroughly impressed with how cool El Segundo seemed," she recalled. "Almost without trying — it seems pretty effortless. There is no hip vibe competing with it. People just show up and it's incredibly cool. It makes its own weather."

What really struck Dietz-Brown was that the art walk seemed to understand artists' needs — not just the lack of a fee, but in every detail of how the artists were treated and presented.

"You can tell this whole thing is designed by an artist," she said. "That's unusual."

Murphy was struck at the conviviality that took sway all over town.

"It was such a rush," Murphy said. "People you know and complete strangers walked through the doors and enjoyed art, drinks, snacks, music, talking to artists and talking about art. It was so good to see the community enjoying themselves and each other, people coming out of their homes and their cars and walking...You know, people come out for the Fourth of July

and put lawn chairs in the street, but this was about learning what is going on in your community that is creative and interesting.”

This year’s art walk launches June 16 and is expected to be even bigger and better, with 31 venues and 51 artists participating. The range of art will even be broader, with such renowned artists as experimental Instagram videographer Greg Reitman (known as Flying Blynd) and Paul Rouston, who is considered one of the greatest body painters in the world and is also an accomplished photographer.

“I saw his name on an application [for the artwalk] and felt like I’d won the lottery,” Socrates said.

The City of El Segundo has also thrown its support squarely behind the event, opening up the historic Main Library as a venue and providing both street banners and a shuttle service for the art walk.

Councilman Drew Boyles said he believes that the artistic blossoming of El Segundo began with the arrival of ESMoA and is quickly becoming a defining trait of the city, one which goes hand-in-hand with its becoming an attraction for the “new creative” wave of business development sweeping down from Venice, Culver City, and Santa Monica.

“It’s a lot of energy, more than has been seen in El Segundo in a long time,” Boyles said. “We’ve always been known as a leader in science and aerospace. Now we are actually starting to lead in arts and culture, too, which I think is catching people by surprise.”

The sense, with the art walk and the cultural burgeoning of El Segundo, is that something beautiful has just begun.

“I think El Segundo, with its quirkiness and industrial background, has the opportunity to be an incredible masterpiece, if you will, with all kinds of different art throughout the city,” Boyles said. “I would love to see Chevron do art on the oil tanks coming up Grand Avenue.”

The EL SEGUNDO ART WALK takes place June 16, July 21, and August 18 from 5 to 9 p.m. See ElSegundoArtWalk.com for more information.

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