



## Rejuvenating the community, one mural at a time

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A DJ spins cool cumbia-inspired beats under the dim lighting of Oakland's Layover, as the people sitting on the plush couches are joined by friends. Some get up to dance as they make their way to the bar. On the wall are a series of artworks, done in a variety of mediums, from oil and aerosol paint to stencils. But the smooth, clean walls of this bar aren't a natural home for these pieces of art, and for the artists who have painted them, it's a major change from their usual canvas—abandoned buildings and walls.

One of the paintings, of a woman engulfed by strands of her blue and black hair, looks like something straight out of a Sin City comic. Another painting using a brighter blend of colors is of a young girl standing in long grass as she stares off into the distance.

The artwork belongs to the Community Rejuvenation Project, a grassroots collective of Oakland street artists from all types of backgrounds who work in a wide range of mediums. All of the artists have some experience with public art, whether it's through graffiti art, tagging or doing murals. The Rejuvenation Art Show at the Layover, which opened last week and will run for the next month, demonstrates the group's diverse styles, but it's more than just about art.

"The idea of rejuvenation," said Desi W.O.M.E., one of the project's founders, "is that we're targeting the most blighted areas; the places that the owners aren't taking care of. We're going out transforming these places to give them new life."

W.O.M.E.'s self-given last name often changes in meaning. One day it stands for "Weapons of Mass Expression." On another it's "Worries of Mother Earth," "Without My Ego," or one of the many others meanings that he says defines who he is. W.O.M.E, who is sporting a goatee with rectangular-framed glasses and a driving hat, doesn't give his age; he just says, "I'm pretty old, but I'm getting younger every day."

W.O.M.E. started off his art career as an aerosol writer in Chicago in the early 1990s. He studied under several influential stylists in Chicago that taught him how to conceptualize his graffiti lettering and penmanship. As he matured, he moved away from only painting his name to painting scenes of that included people and symbols. He's now been painting murals in Oakland for a decade.

W.O.M.E. started off as what most cities deem an illegal graffiti writer, but over time has become a quasi-legit street artist. He still doesn't always receive permission to paint at a particular location, and a lot of the time the murals are done covertly on abandoned properties. But with more murals being completed each month and CRP's name showing up on more walls, community organizations and even the city of Oakland have begun to give the group their blessings.

He and other Oakland-based aerosol artists were painting murals under different names before the idea of forming the crew known as CRP was born approximately three years ago. "We wanted it to be something more inclusive that people could get down with," he said.

By 2008, he and other artists did a couple of murals and starting signing the wall with "Community Rejuvenation." In 2009, the group hosted a summer youth employment project that was funded by the Lao Family Community Development, a non-profit that serves low-income neighborhoods. With the grant money, W.O.M.E. was able to hire 30 Oakland youth to clean up 150 blocks around the areas where CRP was painting murals.

After each mural was finished, CRP and the young people from the employment program threw a block party for the community. The group provided food, music, dancing and performers, "just ways to really give the community ownership of the murals that we were doing," W.O.M.E. said.

Shortly after the youth employment project, CRP, with the help of other youth art organizations like Art in Action, Colored Ink and Grind for Green, opened the [Oakland Green Youth Media Arts Center](#), which helps underserved young people gain artistic and professional development. CRP members painted a large mural on the outside of the center, located at Telegraph and 28<sup>th</sup> Street, and after that, W.O.M.E. said, more and more people from all art mediums started approaching the group, asking if they could paint with them.

"We decided that we were going to open it up beyond the realm of where we come from which is the subway writing culture," W.O.M.E. said. "We opened it up to brush painters, oil painters, stencil artists—just kind of got everyone involved."

There are about 15 central people in the collective now, though not all are painters. Some are video artists and photographers, others are grant writers and interns who help with internal structure of the group so that they can sustain their mission of painting for the community.

In 2010, CRP completed 27 murals. So far this year, the group has finished 22 murals and W.O.M.E said they are headed towards 40 by the time the year is out.

Many of the murals the group paints deal with social issues like overconsumption of fossil fuels, police brutality, and the death Oscar Grant. Other themes celebrate family, health and cultural ancestry.

Last year, CRP created the MLK Cultural Corridor by painting a series of murals along the Martin Luther King Way strip in West Oakland. The murals include brightly colored images of historical figures like Marcus Garvey and Rosa Parks.

At 25<sup>th</sup> Street and Martin Luther King Way, an entire abandoned building was transformed with a variety of images, from indigenous people beating on drums to a child riding a tricycle to a snake holding a sign that says "Stop driving." On the other side, the sign "Welcome to West Oakland, Mob Headquarters" greets traffic coming south down MLK Way.

For W.O.M.E, there are spiritual and moral impulses behind his paintings. "One of the first steps in all of this work is to understand who you are, what your role is, and our role is to craft these visual prayers to help the community regain its sense of identity," W.O.M.E said. "As much as you see the billboards out there, Coca Cola and Chevron going out and advertising, acting like they are doing something positive, we have to counter that with community control of our visual space."

His group believes that the city could do more to protect murals from being taken down by anti-blight city crews. W.O.M.E said he is working with the city of Oakland to craft a policy that would allow artists who have permission from the city to legally take over the exterior of abandoned spaces and transform them into pieces of art. W.O.M.E. said this would also involve responsibility for things like clean up and maintenance of the area near the mural, and in some instances, even creating small nearby gardens.

He feels that letting people paint on abandoned properties is one way a community can take ownership over blight in their area, even without the property owner's consent. In most situations, he said, the owner is impossible to reach and is not keeping up with city standards of blight abatement. "We feel that the community, in the same way that you can adopt a median, should be to adopt the wall," he said. "Instead of continuously making the city responsible, which costs taxpayer money, the community should have the option of saying, 'We're going to maintain this wall.'"

The group also hopes that the city will create a mural registry that will direct the city's blight abatement organizations, Community Economic Development Agency and Public Works Department to not paint over CRP murals or others done by registered artists with the city's permission. W.O.M.E. said that if a city worker can't tell if the art they are looking at is a legitimate piece of community art or graffiti that adds to blight, then they can check a mural registry and see if it's been labeled as protected.

"We're on the ground painting murals that are actually going to affect the peoples lives," he said, "but we'd like to be protected while we do that."

Although the group believes it will be a while before the city initiates a mural registry, W.O.M.E said Oakland is still his favorite place to paint. "It's the home of a lot of struggles, really powerful history from Black Panthers to a lot of the labor movements that came out of this," he said. "I feel that the work that we're doing here is directly inspired by all of the people that came here before us that paved the way. We're really honored to be out here painting for the people."

*Check out the map to see where you can find some of CRP's murals in Oakland. The Rejuvenation Art Show will continue at the [Layover](#) (1517 Franklin Street) until the end of August. And for more information about CRP, [check out their website](#) and [read another Oakland North story](#) about a CRP mural project at the St. Vincent de Paul Community Center.*