



Lesli Marshall's Cosmic Journey mural is on the rear of the Pecan Lodge building. (Tom Fox/Staff Photographer)

LOCAL ART

How a Dallas developer helped artists turn Deep Ellum into a street-art paradise

By [Michael Granberry](#) | Staff Writer Published March 3, 2016

Deep Ellum ebbs and flows with its own rare history. Its earliest days meander back to the 19th century, when Robert S. Munger opened his first cotton plant, the Continental Gin Co., near Elm Street and Trunk Avenue. Henry Ford zeroed in on Deep Ellum for one of his earliest automotive plants, in 1914.

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That was business, and this is the blues: Deep Ellum soon became a hotbed of jazz and home-grown American sound. Its lineup of iconic blues greats included Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson, Hullie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter, T-Bone Walker and Bessie Smith, who sang her sweet, soulful tunes in such clubs as The Harlem and The Palace.

And then there’s art. Murals in particular have long provided visual punctuation to the soul and spirit of Deep Ellum.

Thankfully, Scott Rohrman took notice.



Developer Scott Rohrman receives hugs from artists Sara Reyes (left), Jane Beaird (center) and Emma Miller. Rohrman enlisted artists from North Texas and one from Europe to paint murals in bold, bright strokes all over his Deep Ellum properties. (Tom Fox/Staff Photographer)

He's the owner of 42 Real Estate, which since 2012 has bought 39 properties in Deep Ellum, taking title to a mere fraction of the community's 177 acres. Rohrman fell in love with Deep Ellum almost immediately, but says he wanted it to remain, now and forevermore, Deep Ellum. "As I was doing research to determine if we even wanted to buy the properties," he says, "I started asking a lot of people: What makes Deep Ellum tick? I found out it's music, art, community and freedom."

He followed that with a mandate to his team: "If we're going to buy down here, we don't want to detrimentally affect any of those things."

42 Murals Walking Tour



Next time you're in Deep Ellum visit our **42 Murals walking tour** from your mobile device. You'll be able to find all of the murals in this project and read comments from the artists who painted them.

Thus was born the 42 Murals project, the creation of Rohrman's downtown Dallas-based company. He enlisted 42 artists from all over North Texas and one from Europe to paint murals in bold, bright strokes all over his properties.

It began with Dallas artist and corporate art curator Lesli Marshall introducing Rohrman to Adrian Torres, a painter from Spain. Torres had been hanging out in Deep Ellum for several months. When he met Rohrman, he proclaimed, "This is the place where I really feel at home in Dallas. It feels like Europe. It feels like New York. It feels urban. I love Deep Ellum!"

He was ready to head back to Spain when he asked Rohrman if he could paint a giant mural of elephants, near Main and Exhibition.

"It blew everybody away," Rohrman says. "It is a phenomenal painting. All of a sudden, we started getting phone calls."



Artist Adrian Torres' mural titled Deep Ellumphants is part of the 42 Murals project in Deep Ellum. (Tom Fox/Staff Photographer)

Soon, 42 Real Estate put out a call on its website asking artists to submit depictions of murals they could and would paint. Rohrman says the company didn't have a lot of money to devote to the project, but that didn't stop the submissions. He got 225 for 42 spots.

Rohrman is the first to admit he's hardly an art critic or even a connoisseur. But he knows what he likes.

"We may have picked the 42 worst ones," he says, "but I really don't care. We picked what we liked. We made our selections based on the people. We

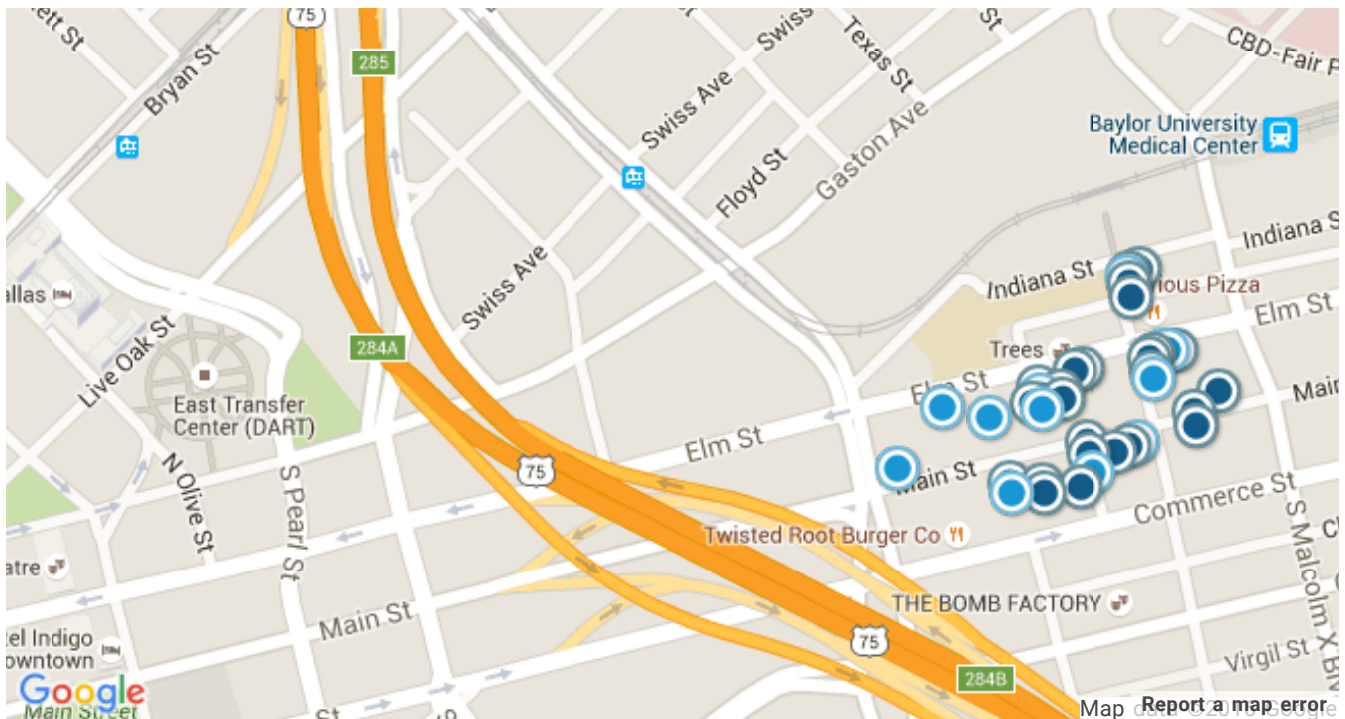
did not pick based on their portfolio. We did not pick based on their résumé.

“I was not interested in anyone’s résumé. I was interested in the person, in the artist, in what made them tick, why they wanted to paint.”

The 42 chosen ones include a 14-year-old girl and a 60-something grandmother who had never painted murals before. Rohrman paid each of the 42 artists \$1,000, stipulating that the money was not a payment for art, but rather a stipend for living expenses.

THE 42 MURALS PROJECT MAP

Click on the pins below to get a small peek at the murals. Photos courtesy 42 Murals project. Visit our mobile page for a walking tour of the 42 Murals project.



And then, he says, “this very cool thing happened.” The community came out in droves, snapping pictures of the murals and spreading them all over social media.

With Torres’ Deep Ellumphants serving as an anchor, the murals light up walls all over Deep Ellum, spreading their inviting color down Main, Commerce and Elm, from Exposition on the east to the Good-Latimer

Expressway on the west.

They include Sarah Reyes' Think Ellum, whose boldness expresses itself in yellow, powder blue and maroon. Her mural is at Main and Malcolm X. "I think the project serves as a great symbol," says Reyes, 29, "by articulating the resurgence of Deep Ellum." Since she and her colleagues finished painting their murals — all but one is complete — she spotted "a lot more people coming out to walk around. There are tons of photoshoots every weekend."



Artists (from left) Emma Miller, Lesli Marshall, Daniel Driensky, Sarah Reyes and Jane Beard are a handful of the artists working on the 42 Murals project under way in the Deep Ellum area of Dallas. They are photographed in front of Reyes' piece called Think Ellum. (Tom Fox/Staff Photographer)

Like Rohrman, Daniel Driensky, 31, found himself getting caught up in the

musical history of Deep Ellum. His mural is The Devil and Robert Johnson, which offers a striking portrait of the blues great who recorded his landmark album in Dallas, just a few blocks west of Deep Ellum. Driensky noted that “the phrase, Deep Ellum, comes from the African-American pronunciation of Deep Elm during that period of the 1920s and 1930s, when so many blues greats descended on the community. I wanted my mural to bring back the feeling of that history. I think it’s already meant a lot to Deep Ellum. People have told me how they like seeing color on a wall that was, in the past, blank and bare.”

Those once-bare walls now contain such dazzling pieces as Jeremy Biggers’ Social Worship, Lisa Boorse’s Riduzione, which pays homage to Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Haylee Ryan’s Truelove Series: Akard & Elm, 1938. There isn’t a clunker in the bunch. They happily invade the walls of 39 properties, acquired from 27 sellers, that encompass 200,000 square feet.

“The goal,” Rohrman says, “is to keep Deep Ellum eclectic and edgy, just not have it be dangerous or dirty. In other words, EE – not DD.”



Gabe McCool’s Cake (left) and Haylee Ryan’s Truelove Series: Akard & Elm, 1938 are two of the murals in Deep Ellum. (Tom Fox/Staff Photographer)

When he thinks of the history of Deep Ellum, Barry Whistler thinks of music and murals and the distinct intersection of the two. “The first person that comes to mind is Frank Campagna,” says Whistler, who’s celebrating the 30th anniversary of his Deep Ellum art gallery. “Those early murals, most of

the really good ones, were his.”

Whistler says the new generation of murals works well with music “to send a signal of what’s going on here.” And again, he says, much of the credit goes to Campagna, whom many call the godfather of the Deep Ellum mural movement.

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Campagna, the operator of Deep Ellum’s Kettle Art Gallery since 2005, has spent most of his life on its funky streets. As D magazine once noted in a profile: “He was there in the early 1980s, hosting bands at his Main Street art studio, Studio D, on weekends. The Dead Kennedys played at the tiny Studio D. So did the Meat Puppets, Hüsker Dü, the Big Boys. He was there in the ’90s, when the old, empty warehouses and cheap art studios turned into nightclubs and bars and restaurants. His murals on their walls provided a backdrop for a couple of generations of weekend fun. Many are still there.”

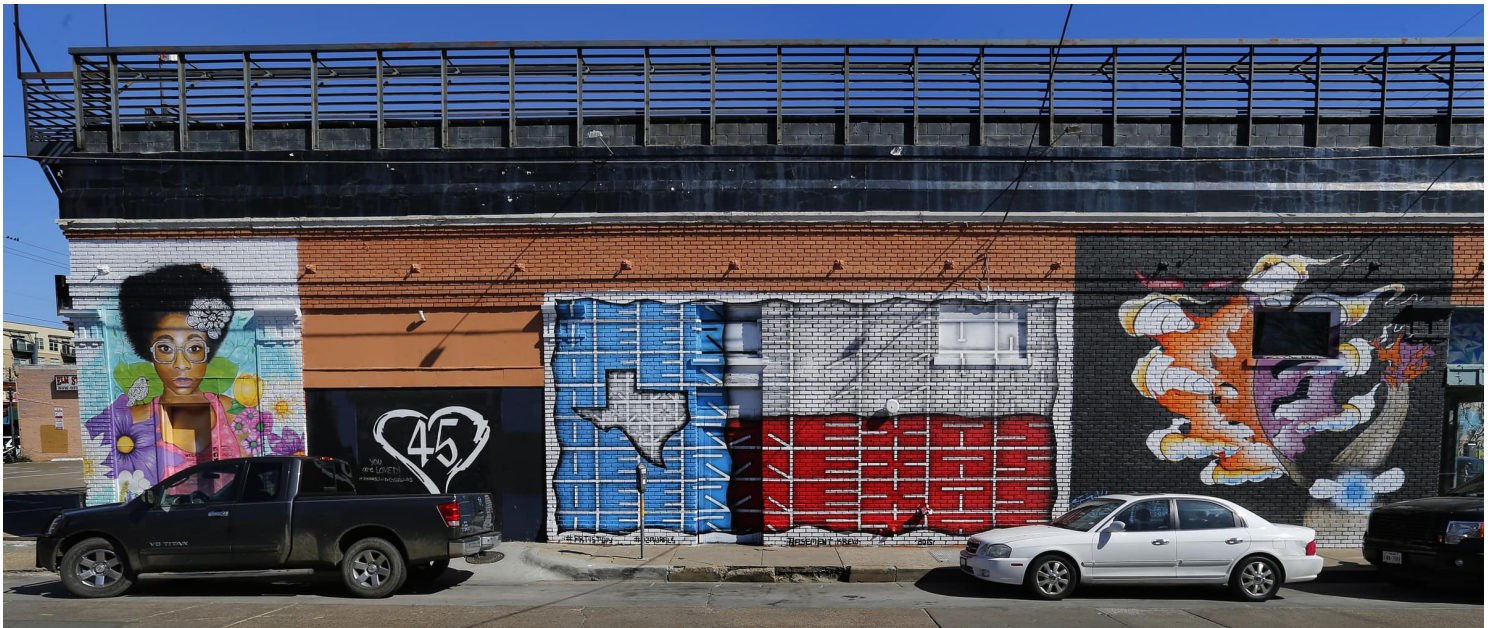
About Kinnon Chapman



Kinnon Chapman helped facilitate the 42 Murals project for 42 Real Estate, where she specializes in marketing, business development and client relations.

Campagna says he painted his first mural in Deep Ellum during the 1980s, when the neighborhood launched one of its numerous “up” periods. His debut mural appeared on the side of a furniture store, which later became the Gypsy Tea Room and is now The Door. “When I first came to Deep Ellum,” Campagna says, “I felt very comfortable. I had my first one-man art show there in 1981. It made more sense to put your art out in the public view and let people find out who you were, as opposed to hoping they walked through a gallery.”

It was all about high visibility and making your mark, an ethos Campagna followed in painting more than 1,000 murals on the side of the Gypsy Tea Room building. For that reason alone, he loves the 42 Murals idea. He recalls wistfully the murals of the long-gone Good-Latimer tunnel, a project he oversaw. If 42 Murals can help restore Deep Ellum as “the mural capital of Texas,” he’s all for it.



Sanah Brown's Mega Zee (left), Daniel Yanez's Deep Texas Pride, and Joseph Alexander's Fairy's Treasure are three of the murals in Deep Ellum. (Tom Fox/Staff Photographer)

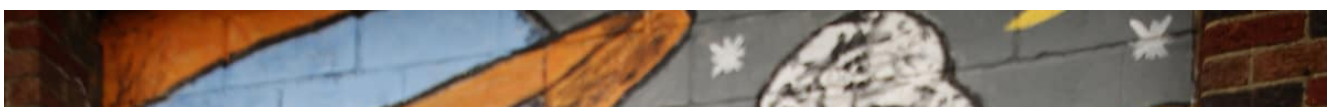
“I think it creates a destination, for sure. If you’re going to be a visual artist, murals are the best way to get your name out there,” Campagna says. “Put it up on a wall, man, and wait for people to come see you.”

There’s a certain magic, he says, in “working shoulder-to-shoulder with a bunch of artists, who share a common goal.” He believes in “assisting and nurturing upcoming artists locally and regionally” and says 42 Murals, along with Kettle Art Gallery, can provide a safe haven for such a dream.

“I choose not to sell out,” Campagna says.

These days, he’s back on Main Street, his populist gallery in a new space owned by Rohrman, who’s also credited with luring the intensely popular barbecue haven, Pecan Lodge, from the Dallas Farmer’s Market to Deep Ellum.

Campagna says Rohrman brings a “nice, clean, clear direction. He has a culturally minded integrity about him where he’s trying to keep things intact and create an area that is a cultural destination in Dallas.” Rohrman, Campagna says, differs from “developers who would bulldoze it and put up another Galleria.”





Daniel Driensky is pictured with his mural titled The Devil and Robert Johnson. (Tom Fox/Staff

Photographer)

Rohrman says he and his colleagues have discussed the businesses they hope to attract to Deep Ellum, saying “we don’t care what race, creed, color or religion anybody is. But we’re very concerned about this: Are they a good businessperson? What we don’t want is for somebody to open a business, not be able to make a go of it, then they start selling drugs and doing things just to make ends meet. So we’re looking for good operators. Other than that, we don’t really have issues.”

Even tattoo shops are OK with Rohrman, who says he much prefers those to the blandness of chain restaurants. “So far,” he says, “we have not signed any chain restaurants, and we have had several chances.”

What he doesn’t want, he says, is another Uptown. He has no problem with Uptown — some of his best friends live and work there — but, he says, “as much as I enjoy Uptown, Deep Ellum should have its own character.” What excites him most is “the art and the music of Deep Ellum and its rich history. We have 21 live music venues in Deep Ellum. We put up 42 murals, but I bet you could find an additional 100 murals all over the neighborhood. Deep Ellum is a sanctuary of public art.”

Rohrman revels in the fact that, so far, he and his project have gotten a thumbs-up from residents, whom he contends reacted suspiciously when they first laid eyes on him.

“I wear button-downs and golf shirts and khakis, and at first, people looked at me like, ‘Can we trust this guy?’ You ought to be wary of new, right? But after I did not put in a cheap-beer-and-wet-T-shirt tenant, and I didn’t put in Baby Gap, they started to look at me like, ‘Hey, he’s OK.’ ”

Deep Ellum, he says, “is the jewel in the crown of a really wonderful city.” Part of maintaining that jewel, he says, is “to go out and get 42 local artists to put their souls on the walls of Deep Ellum. And I think they have, in a beautiful, glorious way.”

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Pecan Lodge Mural by Lesli Marshall

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03:57 |



GOOD LATIMER MURALS

In the Summer of 2009 an assortment of artists associated with Kettle Art Gallery and the Deep Ellum Community Association, decided it was time to create a new gateway to the area along the Good Latimer corridor.

Deep Ellum Mural project 2009

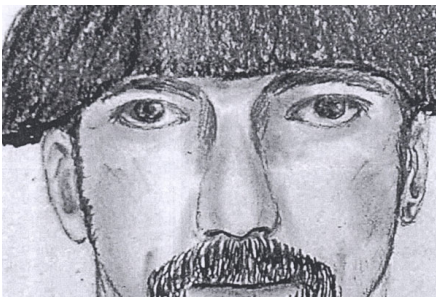


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Gmaids

4 hours ago

I need to get a office here! looks so exciting!

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Katy Larsen from Facebook

2 days ago

Thanks! How marvelous

Like Reply



DFW75208

2 days ago

Very cool. Go Oak Cliff did this on 7th Street several years ago. A bunch of artists did murals between Bishop Arts and Winnetka Heights. Most are still there and are lovely.

Like Reply

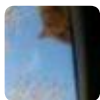


Sarah Magee from Facebook

3 days ago

Woo hoo Emma!

Like Reply



dreamys33

4 days ago

Awesome.

:)

1 Like Reply



ShawnMatheny

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Just one step better than what Mexico city looks like

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JimLuther

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@ShawnMatheny not sure what you're trying to say. But either way, not remotely similar. Mexico City is one of the most gorgeous cities in the world.

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GeorganaDavis

"Graffiti Artist" is oxymoron.

4 days ago

1 Like Reply



GeorgeDavid

@GeorganaDavis No wonder you were awake 3 hours ago. I probably wouldn't sleep either if I was as sad and bitter as you.

4 days ago

Like Reply



EricFoster

@GeorganaDavis The comments of a Noxymoron.

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GeorganaDavis

This is not "art."

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Nicole Ivanitski-Wight from Facebook

Mackenzie: We aren't far!

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Carole Ann Kaplan from Facebook

Katy Larsen, have to share these Deep Ellum murals. Love the elephants.

4 days ago

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Corinne Tononi from Facebook

Tiffany Marie.....this is very cool!

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Monica Allen from Facebook

Let's go Lester Allen IV

5 days ago

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Coleman Chance from Facebook

I thought I had come across some really interesting sidewalk art in Deep Ellum the other day, until I realized it just puke after yet another wine walk.

5 days ago

1  Like Reply



[Sigrid Tune](#) from Facebook

5 days ago

That is why people drive for hours up to Santa Barbara, CA....the art the music etc...which attracts the eateries. So, you are SO right Mr. Cosio.

1  Like Reply



[Victor Páez](#) from Facebook

5 days ago

Don't forget the gastro aspect...FOOD!

Like Reply



[Fran Sterling](#) from Facebook

5 days ago

Wow. Love to see this!

1  Like Reply



[Valiere Simpson](#) from Facebook

5 days ago

Great article. Definitely electric and edgy. \U0001f609\U0001f44a

1  Like Reply



[Steve Cosio](#) from Facebook

5 days ago

The acronym to a great downtown is ACME -- Art, Culture, Music & Entertainment. Deep Ellum has it all.

1  Like Reply

This comment has been deleted



[slimpyslim](#)

5 days ago

freedom for a bunch of old suburban folks to come in from McKinney and walk around. If you haven't been to deep ellum recently, it's pretty much about as old and white as bishop arts is now. In fact just a weekend or two ago I tried to go to deep ellum brewery but it was packed with old white people and a child's birthday party. A BIRTHDAY PARTY FOR A CHILD AT A BREWERY THAT DOES NOT EVEN HAVE FOOD. Nothing too threatening for you now that "cool Mom" and "cool Dad" have taken over.

I mean, jeeze, look at the people in the photos: skinheads, bikers, and junkies they are not.

Like Reply



[GeorganaDavis](#)

5 days ago

This trash is not "art."

1  Like Reply



slimpyslim

5 days ago

@GeorganaDavis wow! to have internationally renowned art critic GeorganaDavis weigh in with her insightful critique is surely quite an honor these "artists" will cherish for life.

1  Like Reply



JulieB

4 days ago

@GeorganaDavis One person's art is another person's eyesore. Not every piece I've seen appeals to me, but I absolutely love some of them, like the elephants and more photographic murals. But hey, that's my own taste. Just because some of the others don't appeal to me does not mean they're trash. And while I don't think those murals would fit in with the character of say, downtown Plano, they absolutely fit in with the character and history of Deep Ellum. If you're not from the area (or you happen to be one of the many who have been largely unaware of that gem), you might want to read up on the history of that part of town. You may be surprised to discover what a vibrant, eclectic place it really is.

Here's some reading to get you started: <https://thecommondesk.com/blog/the-cool-blue-history-of-deep-ellum>

1  Like Reply



Maddog

5 days ago

I just love the arts and crafts. DE is just like living in SF 30 years ago!!! Need more rainbows though!!!

1  Like Reply



GeorganaDavis

5 days ago

@MaddogIt won't last much longer because Deep Ellum has been due for a face life for decades.

1  Like Reply

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