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FEATURED

Arts in April

In AmCan hills, urban artists turn ruins into concrete canvases

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Howard Yune/Register

The Philadelphia street artist known as Enem develops a mural, devoted to the French cartoon characters Asterix and Obelix, at the Napa Valley Ruins and Gardens in American Canyon. The remains of a cement plant that operated from the 1970s are located at the proposed site of the Watson Ranch residential community, whose developer organized the

AMERICAN CANYON — Where the shells and stumps of concrete buildings stand, developers hope to raise homes, restaurants, stores and a town square. But in the meantime, the remains of an abandoned cement factory serve as huge backdrops for graffiti painters – including seven urban artists who came to the ruins on Sunday to spray-paint new murals.

Through the morning and afternoon, four groups of visitors passed through a steel gate at the end of South Napa Junction Road, then up a grassy path and onto the onetime grounds of the Standard Portland Cement Co.

Within the weathered, crumbling walls were the brightly colored, jagged and curved letters and patterns common to big-city streetscapes. Along the walls were artists who had arrived with their paint cans, brushes and rollers – creators like the man who calls himself Apexer, who began laying down a green coating on a weathered slab onto which he would superimpose geodes, crystals and other patterns for the next several hours.

For Apexer, the sharp contrast of urban-style ruins within and wide-open spaces nearby was stimulating, not jarring.

“My work is heavily nature-based,” said the artist, who is also known as Ricardo Richey and belongs to an artists collective that creates murals in San Francisco. “It’s quite fitting and rewarding to be able to paint out here.”

Perhaps the most unusual exhibit of the county’s annual Arts in April slate, the American Canyon tour was at once a glimpse at the industrial remnants where the Watson Ranch community is planned – and a celebration of the urban-style painting that marks the walls and may, perhaps, remain in the future.

“The developers wanted to take advantage of a canvas that’s already there, and Arts in April was a convenient occasion for us to say, ‘Let’s do this,’” said Mark Joseph, a local councilman, Watson Ranch advocate and president of the American Canyon Arts Foundation.

Now known as the Napa Valley Ruins and Gardens, the factory site is being targeted by McGrath Properties of Oakland as the future home of the Watson Ranch development. The project, which awaits City Council approval, would include hundreds of homes in its 250-acre residential zone as well as a 50-acre town center with entertainment, stores and restaurants – the kind of well-defined core absent in American Canyon, whose growth has clustered around four-lane Highway 29 since it incorporated in 1992.

If Joseph and the arts foundation have their way, Watson Ranch will reuse some of the industrial structures and, possibly, the spray-can stylings that have accumulated through four decades.

“We don’t want to lose that tradition of graffiti art,” he said as the first of four tour groups trudged toward the site shortly after 10 a.m. “When you see walls that are 2 feet thick and 30 to 40 feet high, you realize it really is an incredible canvas.”

While Watson Ranch’s art installations remain to be chosen, a member of its development team expected one or more of the factory walls to be preserved and curated, possibly joining an amphitheater and a sculpture garden.

“We want this project to be a leader in visual arts,” Deb Castles said before the tours, which had been postponed two weeks due to rain. “We think this place has a natural creative energy people will respond to.”

Opened around 1902, the Standard Portland Cement factory became the source of concrete for decades of construction work in the Bay Area, including San Francisco’s rebuilding from the devastating 1906 earthquake. The plant operated until the 1970s, when rising energy costs forced its closure, and its buildings and silos gradually slipped into decay and dereliction.

In the 40-plus years since the factory shut down, graffiti artists have treated it as a rare nugget of edgy, city-like scenery seemingly dropped into the placid hills at the edge of south Napa County. Many square yards of spray paint have carpeted the walls, unseen by most Napa County residents – until Sunday, when about 140 people snapped photos, peered into the cone-roofed basalt production building and chatted up the painters.

McGrath Properties and the arts foundation organized the site's first graffiti tour in April 2015, but Sunday's exhibit was the first to feature street artists creating their work in full view. Along one of the factory's roofless corridors was one artist who had arrived from across the country to create a painting with an inspiration from even farther away.

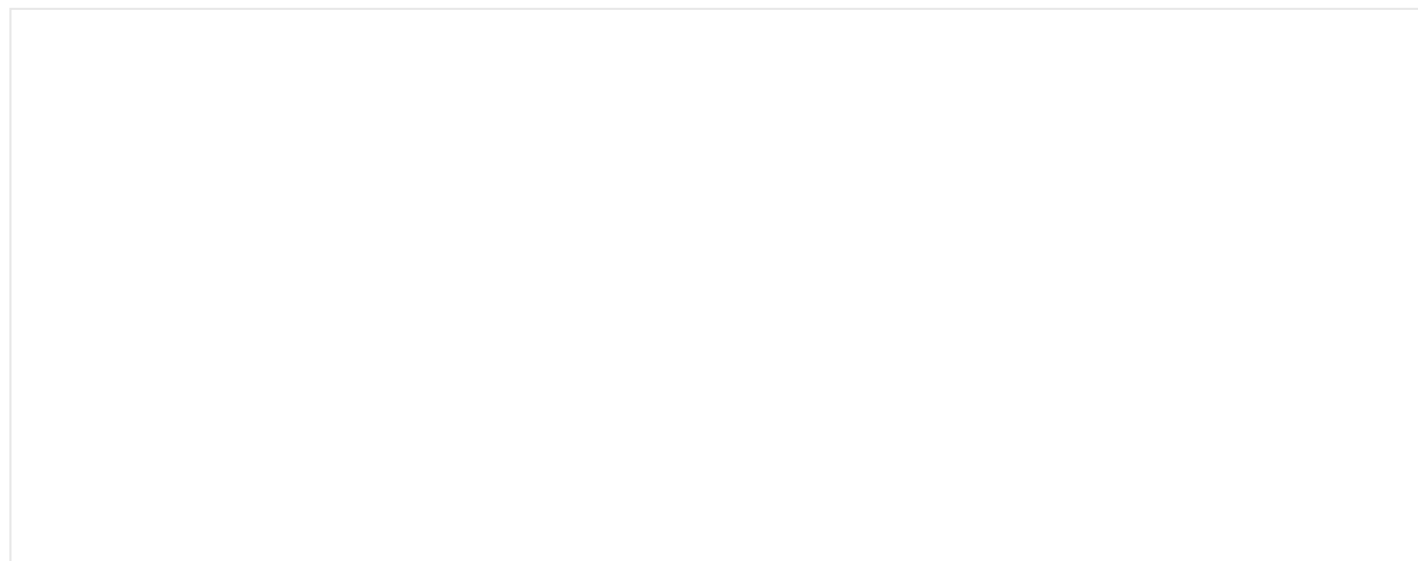
The painter Enem, who was visiting from Philadelphia, carefully traced abstract patterns with a spray can around the mustachioed figures of Asterix and Obelix – the ancient Gallic warriors and best buddies made famous by the French cartoonists René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo.

Only a few hours into the morning, Enem already considered his 3,000-mile journey more than worthwhile, even with an unusually rural wrapper around this industrial backdrop.

“Thought it would be great to work in these ruins,” he said. “Our landscapes are usually in cities, but traveling from place to place gives you access to cool events like this.”

As the first group of about 20 visitors wrapped up the hourlong tour and headed back down the hill, one spectator – Phil Kohlmetz, executive director of the Napa Valley Museum in Yountville – marveled at seeing an open space where graffiti, far from being an act of vandalism, defines the landscape.

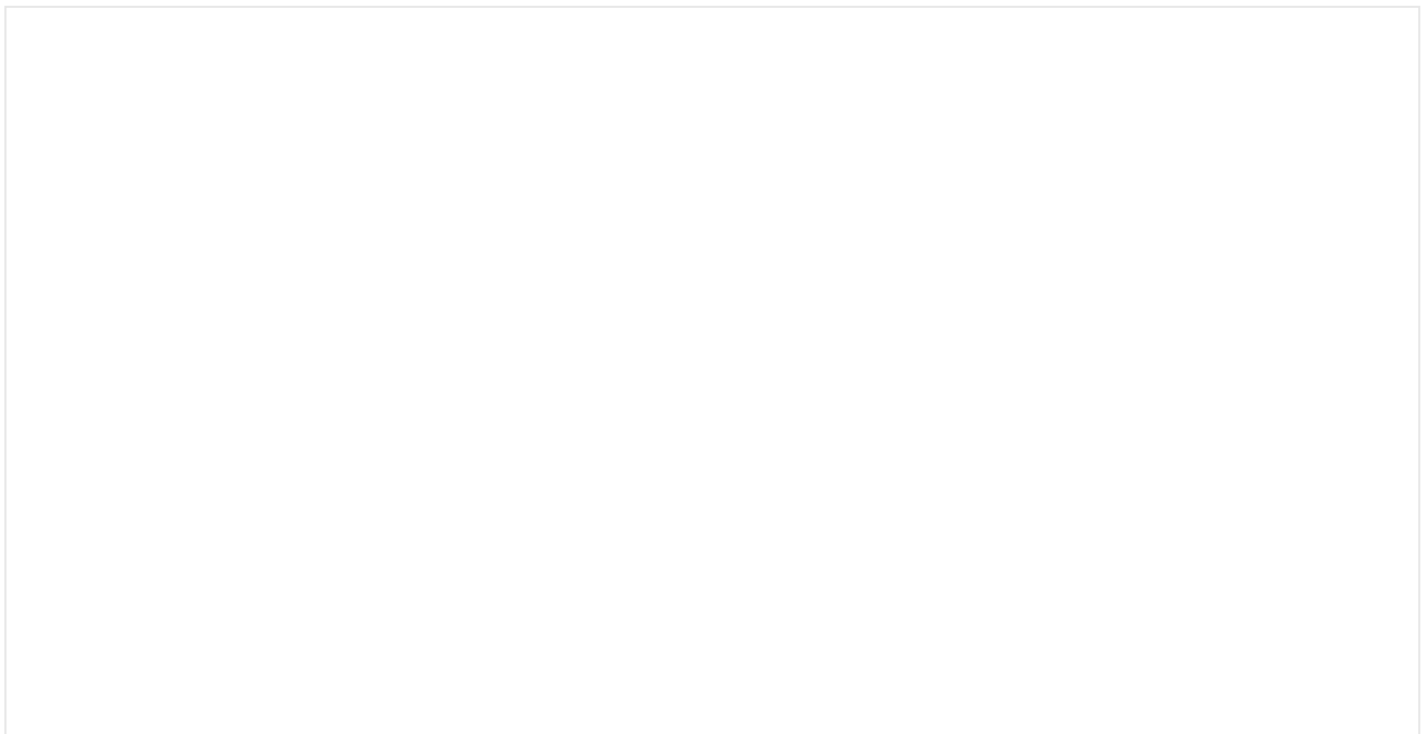
“It's been touched by human hands,” he said, “and to keep touching it with human hands makes all the sense in the world.”





Gallery: Graffiti art in American Canyon
Updated 10 hrs ago

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