

NIGHTFLIGHT[®]

"L.A. Aboriginal" Dave Tourjé: Being True To His Work & N.E.L.A. Proud

By [Bryan Thomas](#) on April 16, 2015



Like any good L.A. story, Dave Tourjé's begins with a good setting, his hometown of Glassell Park, one of L.A.'s oldest neighborhoods, nestled in a gentle valley along the Arroyo Seco corridor, with Eagle Rock and the lazy old San Gabriels to the north, Cypress Park, Atwater Village and downtown L.A. to the south, and hipsterish Highland Park to the east, where you'll still find storied old facades like the archaic LAPD precinct building on York Blvd, still looking like it did in those film noirs filmed here in the 40s.



There's a lot of art history to be found in N.E.L.A. (for north east L.A.) — the historic Garvanza district, for instance, birthplace of the late 19th/early 20th century Arts & Crafts movement, was born nearby, becoming a bohemian enclave that supported the local expressions of the artists who lived there — but there aren't quite as many potential film locations to be found in Glassell Park, which seems to be in a constant state of new construction.



But like all of the hillside communities, this sleepy suburb has its own unique personality, a mix of both Asian and Latino cultures, and its own ugly-beautiful charm: think dingy diurnal mini-malls and shops with security gates and painted awnings, two-storied apartment complexes and Craftsmen bungalows with tidy lawns spread under a pellucid sky, and streets lined with elegant old palms, leaning south as the sun sets and looking like tired showgirls.

In settings like this, colorific street art often springs forth, sometimes unexpectedly, brightening the darkest corners and the sides of *carnicerías* and *mercados*, often taking the form of street graffiti or elaborate imaginative murals of the Virgin of Guadalupe, splashing otherwise dull wall surfaces with bright primary colors and bold brushstrokes, showing lots of bravado and local N.E.L.A. pride.



These indigenous N.E.L.A. inspirations have been seeping into Tourjé's art for decades now, as evidenced by this wonderful short documentary film, *L.A. Aboriginal* — by prize-winning filmmakers Bayou Bennett and Daniel Lir of Dolce Film — which posits Tourjé at the center of a group of artists who call themselves the [California Locos](#).



The California Locos: Norton Wisdom, John Van Hamersveld, Gary Wong, Dave Tourjé and Chaz Bojórquez

The Locos are the first truly native-born generation of L.A. artists who grew up in an interconnected world of Chicano Latino influences and gang culture (just ask anyone in N.E.L.A. about the Avenues), and edgy extreme sport subcultures too, particularly skateboarding (Tourjé used to skate at a place called the “Toilet Bowl,” but today mostly keeps to the sidewalks), BMX biking, motocross dirt-biking and street racing. Years ago, the Glassell Park street Tourjé grew up on, Ave. 42, was bulldozed to make way for the 2 Freeway, but it ended up becoming a dirt playground for Evel Knievel-style bike jumps.

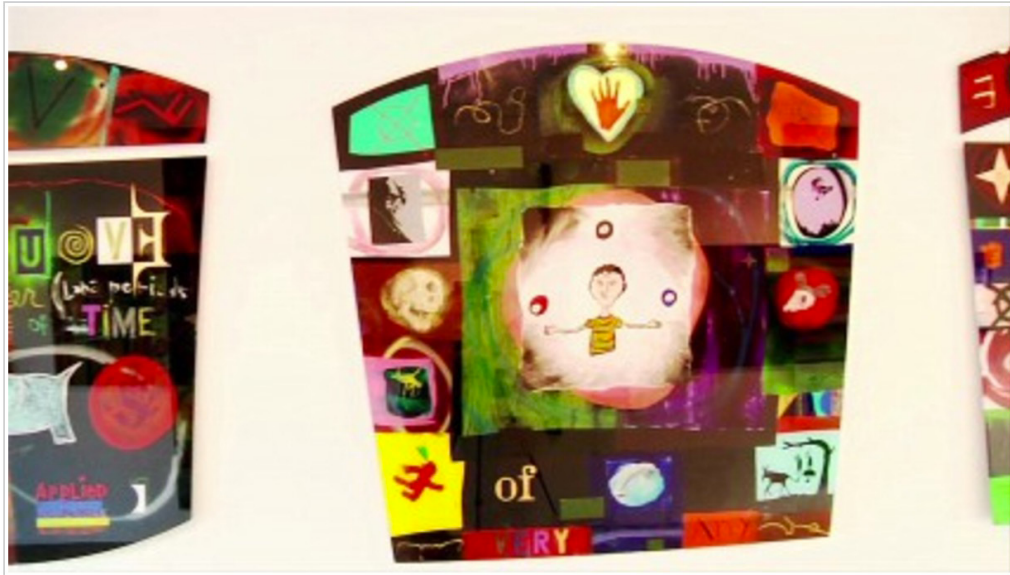


All of Tourjé's unique expressiveness, taking the shape of both high- and low-art, is culturally informed by personal ideals and symbolism and a D.I.Y. don't-give-a-fuckitude. He's widely known in the N.E.L.A. for his paintings on acrylic glass, but it's not the only surface he's painted on. He also draws, he sculpts and bends wire and wood into "found object" art; he designs t-shirt with his own N.E.L.A. logo; he even makes furniture.

Tourjé's life is also filled with music — he was a member of the self-decried "influential if ephemeral" L.A. band, the Dissidents, who shared bills with bands like Camper Van Beethoven, Saccharine Trust, and The Minutemen, to name a few — and he continues to play guitar, and even composed the music for the *L.A. Aborigines* film too.



Tourjé's deep abiding cultural acumen includes understanding what it means to put down your own deep roots. In 1998, Tourjé — who at the time was the primary owner of his own Alpha Structural construction company — purchased and then began renovating the 1907 Monterey Colonial farmhouse residence that had once been the South Pasadena home of Nelbert Murphy Chouinard, the founder of the Chouinard Art Institute.



Born Nelbertina Murphy, Chouinard had been a painter who had attended the Pratt Institute in New York, where the school motto was *“Be true to your work, your work will be true to you.”* She later came west to L.A., where she painted landscapes as a member of the the Eucalyptus School, and also taught art courses at Otis College of Art and Design. That’s where she got the idea to start her own art school.

In 1921, the Chouinard School of Art began in a two-story house on 8th Street in the Westlake area near downtown, and it remained a singularly vibrant local force until it was ultimately was merged during 60s with the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music to establish the California Institute of the Arts, or Cal-Arts.

Tourjé’s immediate goal was to restore the lost history of one of the great art schools in the world, and return it back to being a modern art salon for local students and faculty to gather and discuss what was important to them; in other words, *be true to your work, and your work will be true to you.*



After researching what the institute had meant to the local N.E.L.A. art community at large, he began reaching out to revive interest in Chouinard's illustrious graduates, including costume and fashion designers Edith Head and Bob Mackie, Echo Park ceramist Peter Shire, surf and rock graphic artist John Van Hamersveld, Warner Bros. cartoonist Chuck Jones (and a host of Disney's original crew of animators — see our recent [posting](#) about animator Chuck Menville) and from painter Ed Ruscha, minimalist sculptor Larry Bell and Ojai potter Otto Heino.

By 1999, a year after moving in and completing the first round of renovations, Tourjé had become a guardian of Chouinard's history, the house his chief artifact. That same year, Tourjé formed the non-profit Chouinard Foundation with artist Robert Perine, a graduate of Chouinard who had helped shape Southern California Modernism.

Together they released a newsletter, staged exhibitions and held auctions to raise funds for a revamped Chouinard, which first began welcoming new students in 2003 (Perine died the following year, at age 81). The foundation's advisory board includes legendary SoCal artists and Chouinard alums Ruscha, Lynn Foulkes and Chaz Bojorquez, the godfather of graffiti art, known for working with a stylized placard script, markings that symbolize territory or neighborhood allegiance, experimental iconography, and his stylized skull figure "Señor Suerte."

Tourjé's own education had started at the Art Center College of Design school program, before moving on to study fine art at the School of California in Santa Barbara, and then ultimately returning to the L.A. area. Along the way, he began incorporating cartoon, graphic design and POP art elements, à la Andy Warhol, but he found his own voice by returning back to his N.E.L.A. roots.



Dave Tourjé, POP, 2013. Mixed media on acrylic glass. 108 x 108 in. Zuniga collection, Pasadena, Ca., USA

In 2001, Tourjé had his first one-man exhibition, covering fifteen years of paintings on acrylic glass, at the Riverside Art Museum. His work has also been featured at the Oceanside Museum of Art, the Orange County Museum of Art, and Laguna Art Museum.



In 2005, Tourjé was part of a group from the foundation that discovered “Street Meeting,” which had remained hidden for 70-plus years under the plastered walls at the first Chouinard School in MacArthur Park. It had been painted by Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros in 1932, who had attended Chouinard, and it’s said to be the first wall painting in L.A. A 2006 documentary on the mural’s discovery was nominated for an Emmy. Meanwhile, Tourjé’s Nelbert Chouinard house became South Pasadena Cultural Landmark No. 44.

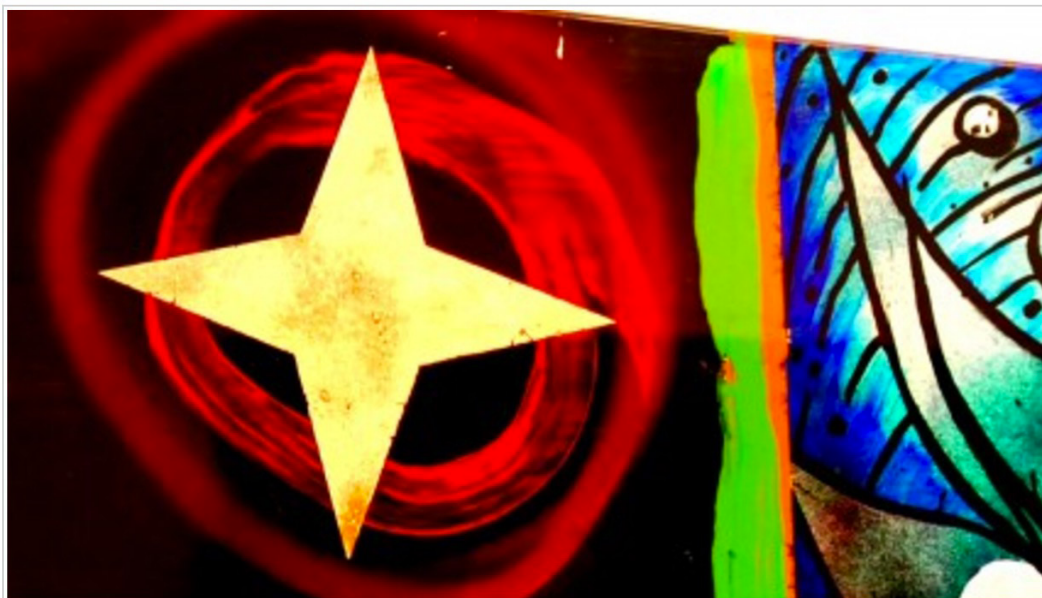


Street Meeting

Tourjé also began the archiving of works from Chouinard and launched an interactive library dedicated to the school's history and artists, important figures like Siqueiros, Ruscha, the Light and Space movement's Robert Irwin, architect Rudolph Schindler, Ferus Gallery's John Altoon, Llyn Foulkes, Mary Corse, Larry Bell, Rick Griffin, John Baldissari, graphic designer John Van Hamersveld, Terry Allen, Ralph Bacerra and Elsa Rady, among many others.



In 2006, as the Chouinard Foundation faced its first financial challenges and ultimately failed to generate the funds to keep it going, Tourjé turned his attention elsewhere, partnering with the L.A. Dept of Recreation and Parks to bring art programming to the inner city, and began offering classes in conjunction with L.A.'s recreation department at the Exposition Park Intergenerational Community Center. The foundation also ran a program allied with the arts group KAOS Network in Leimert Park.



In 2011, Tourjé was included in The L.A. Aboriginal show at the Gregory Way Gallery in Beverly Hills, which led Tourjé and other to working on a documentary called “California Locos,” which tells the L.A. stories of graffiti great Chaz Bojórquez, sculptor Brad Howe, graphic legend John Van Hamersveld, performance painter Norton Wisdom, artist/blues icon Gary Wong as well as Tourjé’s own story.



Chaz Bojórquez.

The film *L.A. Aboriginal* features some of his Tourjé’s Locos colleagues and legendary friends, including Chaz Bojórquez (godfather of Graffiti Art, MOCA, Vans, etc.), John Van Hamersveld (he designed covers for albums by the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, The Beach Boys and others), Norton Wisdom (Llyn Foulkes, Flea, Beck, LA Philharmonic, etc.) and is narrated by the internationally renowned sculptor, Brad Howe.



One writer has perfectly described Tourjé's work, calling it *"fluid, with an underbelly of innocence, ethnicity, earthiness, and polished cleanliness."*

