

Art Alley's colorful 'curator'

Todd Rigione said he envisions art-strewn area as future city center

By Tom Lawrence

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Photos by Tom Lawrence



Photo by Tom Lawrence
Since taggers have damaged some of the art in the alley, Art Alley "curator" Todd Rigione is hanging some of the better work high on walls to protect it.

Art Alley "curator" Todd Rigione, right, talks with James Taylor, who owns a building that's part of Art Alley. Taylor said he admires the increasing quality of the art.

Some see graffiti, gang tagging and vandalism in Art Alley.

Todd Rigione sees beauty, creativity and the birth of a city center.

Rigione is the self-appointed guardian of Art Alley, which has become splattered with paint in recent years. It's also become the home of a growing number of paintings on canvas, sculpture and other forms of art.

"I think it's a great social statement," Rigione said as he stood amidst the paintings, trash receptacles and cars parked in the alley. It's a messy spot, but he smiles as he focuses on the images on walls, not the refuse on the ground, the broken glass or the dog lifting its leg against a pole packed with art.

"It says a lot about Rapid, man," Rigione said. "This is like a (J.D.) Salinger story, this alley."

The alley was hit by graffiti-spraying "taggers" this fall who left profane and anti-abortion messages behind. They left similar graffiti around town.

Rigione, who patrols the alley on an almost-daily basis, covered up the profane and political messages and also covered most of the initials that another tagger left behind on Monday, Oct. 9. He feels a sense of duty in protecting his outdoor gallery.

Rigione said most business owners are pleased with his efforts and admire the quality art in the alley. The alley has become a popular spot for tourists

and locals to walk through as well.

He has made an effort to mount canvas paintings high on walls to prevent vandals or graffiti “artists” from damaging them.

Rigione is an artist and musician who grew up in Seattle and Los Angeles before following his girlfriend, Judi Looyenga, to her hometown of Rapid City almost five years ago. Their home is also used as an art studio, a recording studio and a bed and breakfast that goes for \$175 a night for the opportunity to stay in downtown Rapid City with bohemian hosts and art all around.

“We serve an awesome breakfast,” Rigione said.

He envisions an alley with carts selling food and shops with their back doors open to allow people to move through the alley to the streets and back. It’s the true center of Rapid City, in his view.

“I’ve been trying to make the neighborhood a little more pleasant in the back,” he said.

He’s also excited that some well-known artists have donated works to the alley. Lee Leuning, who has done some of the presidential statues, has donated works and other prominent artists such as Bob Miller, Tim Peterson and David Horan are doing so as well.

“A lot of artists are collaborating,” Rigione said with a broad smile, his wild blond hair sticking out from beneath a stocking hat. “The alley has created a forum for art, a venue.”

Businessowners respond

James Taylor owns the building that houses Again Books. The back of his building is part of Art Alley and he said he’s growing more fond of the area as the art improves.

“It’s becoming more quality art and that’s the great thing about it,” Taylor said.



Barb Elliott

Dakota Interiors co-owner Barb Elliott is a fan of the art, the alley and Rigione. Elliot has owned a business in the block for a decade and said Art Alley can help draw people to downtown.

“I like it, myself,” she said. “I feel it adds something. It gives Rapid City kinda an artsy thing. I like it.”

But not all business owners are fans of the uninhibited outdoor art. Ristorante Marsala owner Tina Van Loan said she admires Rigione and what he’s trying to do.

“Todd had a good plan,” she said. “But it’s the kids who come in behind Todd (who do the damage).

It's grown too big for him."

Van Loan said she doesn't want people applying paint to her building without permission and she said some have sprayed paint that damaged her sports car. It cost \$6,000 to restore the vehicle, Van Loan said.

"It was meant to be a good thing," she said of Art Alley. "I think it's got a little bit out of control. I think it looks like a mess right now."

Rigione was pleased with a young woman who painted 99 red balloons all over the alley recently, an apparent tribute to the 1980s German anti-nuclear pop song. He pointed out the numbered balloons that are scattered through the alley.

Van Loan is less pleased. All she knows is there was red paint on her wall and car.

City won't remove images

Rapid City Senior Patrolman Jim Hansen is charged with heading up a graffiti task force in the city. He said while a cold snap and a small snowfall canceled a graffiti cleanup last month, it will be tried again when the weather warms up.



<http://artalley.awardspace.com/>

Jim Hansen

But Hansen said the plan is to leave Art Alley untouched. The City Attorney's Office will decide what should be done about the alley, he said.

Deputy City Attorney Kevin Lewis said Art Alley has been discussed in the office, but there's no consideration right now to clean the alley up. The art is up by the "consent of the landowners and property owners," Lewis said, and those who don't want it up can have it removed.

"We're not getting involved in this at this time," he said.

Rigione said he knows there's a lot of graffiti in Rapid City and Art Alley gets hit as well. "We get tagged like the rest of them," he said.

But when taggers hit Art Alley, Rigione inspects their "work" and decides whether or not to leave it up. He admits it's a bit audacious for him to decide, but he does so anyway.

"Nobody's ever said anything to me," Rigione said during a rare interview in his large, art-filled loft apartment above Art Alley.

"Nobody's ever said not to," he said.

Most nights he inspects the alley and covers up the profanity and graffiti that's been sprayed or painted on the walls. He also checks the alley most days and said with pride that the only time something offensive stays up is when he's out of town.

"Anybody puts something stupid up there, it's gone," Rigione said. "It's just ignorant stuff, nothing that makes any sense."

He pays for the paint to cover the graffiti and also donates paint and canvass to artists who want to leave something of lasting impact behind. Rigione said he or a friend of his will "install" work if artists contact him.

He also encourages taggers to "upgrade their art" and leave something of beauty behind and not merely hateful words or profanity.

Rigione has a vision of making Art Alley a nationally recognized symbol of artistic creativity and freedom.

"I want people to say, 'Hey, Rapid City has this going on, man,'" he said. "It's a 24-hour gallery. We can create a scene, man."

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