

# Behind the bandanas

Harwood Museum's street art panel discussion lays the cards on the table

Commentary by Rick Romancito

The Hobos showed up without bandanas covering their faces.

Promo-Hobo FreeheART members Steve Gootgeld (aka Alpha), John Heaton (aka Scripture), and Rachel Varela each sat down with KRZA-FM Community Affairs Producer Lisa Goldman, town of Taos Facilities Director Steve Kennebeck, and town of Taos Interim Police Chief David Weaver to talk about street art at a panel discussion hosted by the Harwood Museum of Art, Thursday (Aug. 22).

The discussion was free-flowing and open, offering suggestions and some criticism, but as was stated at the beginning this was not a talk aimed at solving anything. It was merely organized to lay some cards on the table, let people know what thoughts are out there regarding opinions and attitudes toward street art in our community.

Mostly absent, however, were town business people who tend to be the targets of "taggers" and who are often the most vocal when it comes to wanting answers from law enforcement about how to stop what they see as wanton destruction of private property. They should have attended, because one of the first things addressed were some definitions.

First, the Promo-Hobos don't engage in tagging, although Scripture said in remarks to the audience that he's had experience in the past with gangs and vandalism. What they do now, however, is artwork — created with a peaceful and non-violent message — on cardboard or recycled panels that can easily be removed, usually attached to derelict buildings as a way to bring a focus to what they see as urban-style blight.

There were some chuckles after it was stated that the group is running out of exhibition space now that the Hacienda Inn has been torn down, following the recent demolition of the old Bigbees Building and El Pueblo Café.

Graffiti was defined as a world-wide phenomenon that has roots in antiquity, and which in the present has been an accepted and even embraced artform flavored by politics, social consciousness and hip hop sensibility. It's also colorful, highly inventive and visually provocative — as exemplified by artists who have emerged from the scene like Banksy and Jean Michel Basquiat.

Tagging is almost generally reviled as the work of gang member wannabes indiscriminately marking



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Scripture talks about how some of the Harwood's Promo Hobo Curator's Wall Installation is dedicated to friends who have died as the result of drugs and suicide.

their territory in spray painted tribute. This is also a stereotype that is virtually impossible to shake for groups like the Hobos or "graf artists," especially since a few in the audience stated that it instills fear. Once tagging appears, residents are afraid it means

gangs may be targeting their neighborhoods for theft and intimidation.

Once the definitions were stated, the panel-

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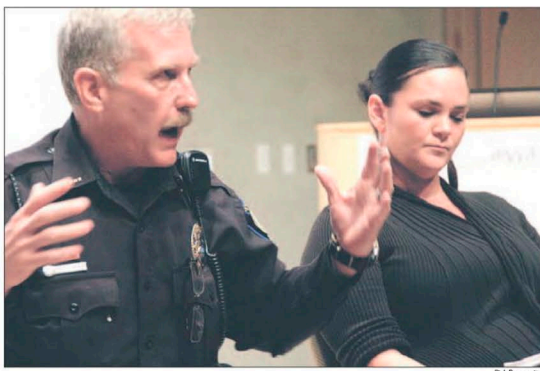
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ists and audience were able to begin talking about the implications of this movement and what attitudes surround it.

One surprise was that neither Weaver nor Kennebeck stood in outright opposition. Kennebeck said that, although part of his job is "graffiti abatement," he is "not against street art." He said that he comes from an artistic background and respects the creative impulse. Weaver recounted his first encounter with Promo Hobo artists one night, who under his nose, decorated the old Mary Medina Building with artistic panels. He said he was impressed by their inventiveness and creativity, not to mention their stealth.

Weaver did bring up an important point amid a number of opinions regarding how outlaw street art is considered beautiful and an improvement, even if it is placed on private property without permission. He said those who propose this point of view are essentially "imposing it" upon people who have worked hard to build their own businesses and beautify their own homes — who don't appreci-



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Interim Police Chief David Weaver makes a point about the requirement of the law and the need for creative outlets.

ate when someone picks their house or store as their canvas. In fact, their viewpoint is very likely in the minority, which leaves it to cops to enforce the law and city workers like Kennebeck to take care of it.

It's a situation where you can't have it both ways. And even opinions expressed about changing the law were shot down by the Hobos them-

selves. Varela said she doesn't want graffiti legalized, saying it would mean having to deal with a bureaucracy that would mean having to fill out forms and get approval for street art. "I don't want red tape on my art," she said.

Like I said at the beginning, this wasn't about finding solutions or answers to these issues, but it did get people talking. Now, if only the "silent



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Town Facilities Director Steve Kennebeck says he is not against street art, but his job requires him to remove tagging that has been identified as vandalism.

majority" would speak up.

Hopefully, more panels of this kind will help sort it all out in one way or another.

The Promo Hobo Curator's Wall Installation will remain on view through Sept. 8. The museum is located at 238 Ledoux Street. For more information, call (575) 758-9826 or visit [harwoodmuseum.org](http://harwoodmuseum.org).