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CREATIVES



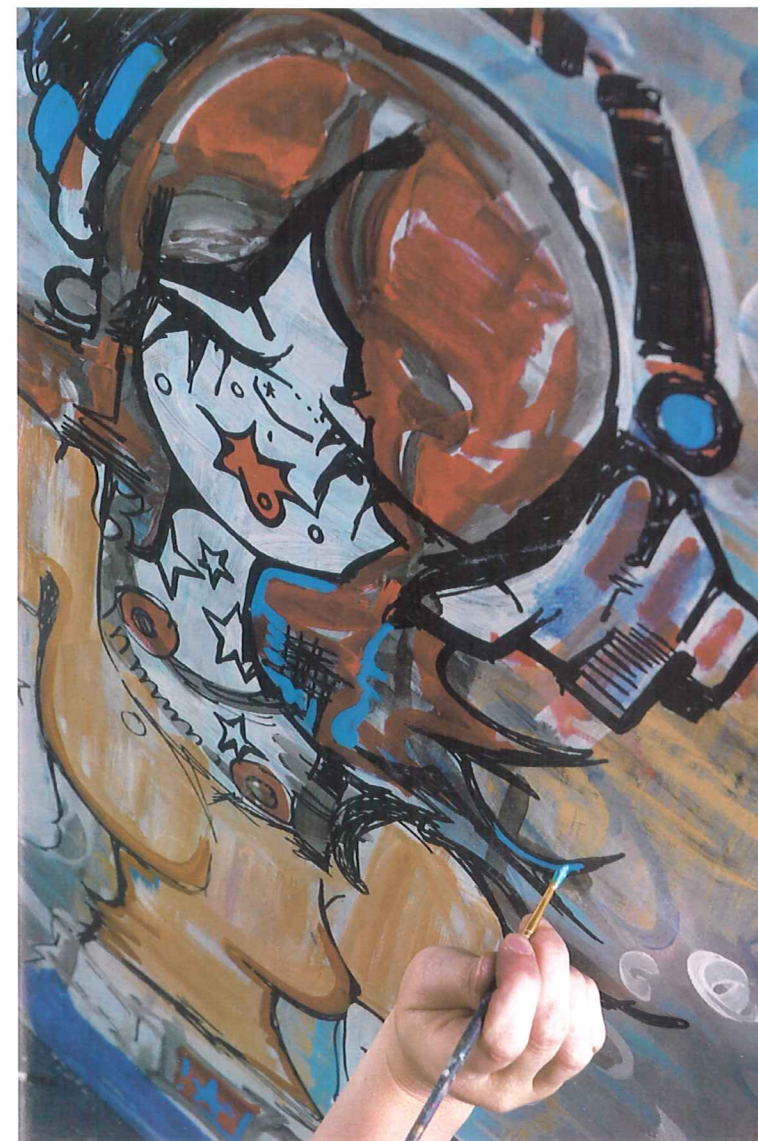
Nikki Zabicki, Urban Artist

Nikki Zabicki is inspired. She's inspired by color, inspired by energy, and most of all, she's inspired by Albuquerque.

Over the last four years, Zabicki has channeled the city's vibrations into her paintings and fashions. Composed of bold colors and street-style imagery, Zabicki's work is starting to define the urban environment that impassions her. You can find her murals at downtown rock epicenter Atomic Cantina, and her designs on locally made skateboards. Some images have even been tattooed on the bodies of devoted fans. But Zabicki is best known for her hand-painted belt buckles.

Under a crystalline resin finish, the buckles pop with candy-colored images of Zias, geishas, and skulls. The accessories have recently detonated in popularity, and this Belen native is preparing to go national.

"I remember when she came up with the buckle idea," says Valerie Hollingsworth, artist director for the





Go Arts Festival. "I thought it was gravy."

Zabicki credits Hollingsworth with introducing her artwork to the public. Zabicki had just begun painting seriously when Hollingsworth invited her to participate in Go Arts in 2004. The first year, Zabicki showcased her paintings. The following year was when her art career began to take off. "The second year [at Go Arts] was my coming out," Zabicki says. "I sold my buckles for the first time."

Success. It wasn't long before Zabicki was working as a full-time artist.

Zabicki still operates from her small apartment-slash-work studio downtown. "Believe it or not, I've actually got quite a manufacturing system set up here," she says, while working at the kitchen table with her dog—a Chihuahua mutt named Rata—in her lap. Zabicki brushes aside the licorice vines and paint supplies to clear a workspace. Half-finished paintings lean against the wall and stacks of fine imported papers are on the floor, but there's a method to her madness.

Zabicki uses a technique that she developed herself. She experimented with a number of approaches before she hit upon her process, a combination of design and materials that result in the belt buckles' signature radiance.

"It's really all about the glue and the paper," Nikki says as she paints love birds on silk screened Japanese paper. After the painting is finished, she applies a final resin coating that actually consumes the paper, leaving just the dye behind. The metal buckle acts as a backlight, and the result is a durable, wearable artwork with colors that luminesce through a hardtop glaze.

The buckles are popular with everyone from chic Nob Hill shoppers to old school skateboarders.

"She made belt buckles look interesting again," says Patrick Frey, manager at the Beach Zone, an Albuquerque skate shop. Zabicki has sold her art there at good clip. Frey attributes her work's popularity to Zabicki's knack for tapping into the city. "She has a pretty good pulse about what's going on in Albuquerque and New Mexico," he says.



In the fall, Beach Zone will produce 200 skate decks emblazoned with Nikki's artwork. That's an honor that's gone to legendary local artists such as Mike Giant in the past.

And while skateboarders make up the bulk of his clientele, Frey says her art is attractive to all kinds of patrons. "That's the rad thing," he says. "Her artwork appeals to everyone from Mom and Dad to a 15-year-old kid."

Zabicki is banking on her work's wide ranging charm to bring her success beyond the borders of New Mexico. Though she has sold her work intermittently outside the state, in September she's kicking off a solid campaign for national distribution. In addition to improving her presence on the internet, she expects to spend the majority of 2009 traveling and promoting her work all around the country.

Valerie Hollingsworth is confident Zabicki will find success as she expands her efforts. She remembers an incident that confirms that while Zabicki's work is inspired by the local scene, her art attracts people from all over. "I went out one night to the Anodyne and we were all wearing buckles by Nikki Zabicki—boys, girls, L.A. actors, local actors, and me. Her drawings and designs are just so fun and fabulous."

As Zabicki sets her sights on a bright future, she hasn't lost track of why she started painting. "I like to make stuff that makes people feel good when they look at it," she says. She hopes her work will amplify the positive energy that inspires her art to begin with. "I don't want it to be about the buckles, or even the artwork. I want it to be about the vibe."

—By Samara Alpern

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