



ONE FRIDAY NIGHT in the spring of 2011, a band of young artists in Santa Fe, New Mexico, prepared to launch a ship. For months they had worked day and night to complete the 75-foot craft, creating a control room full of interactive gadgets, an onboard forest of color-changing trees, and a novel-length log of the ship's odyssey through space and time. In case that wasn't enough to signal this was no ordinary vessel, there was the figurehead jutting from the prow: a six-breasted winged mermaid with the head of a leopard.

How the ship would set sail in landlocked Santa Fe didn't faze the members of Meow Wolf, a collective of creative souls who first came together to assemble art installations that often resembled alien wonderlands. The ship, The Due Return, was their biggest project yet. Meow Wolf had constructed other temporary installations, earning local acclaim. But this, built inside the well-respected Center for Contemporary Arts, would be a turning point. It was their most ambitious project yet, and the first time Vince Kadlubek, the man who would become Meow Wolf's CEO, realized the artists could create something sustainable. "We had a product on our hands," he would later say in the documentary Meow Wolf: Origin Story.



The group has come astonishingly far since then. Funding its work at first through grants, donations, and ticket sales, the art collective found investors and became a for-profit corporation. And in 2016, Meow Wolf opened its first permanent exhibition: the *House of Eternal Return*, a constantly evolving psychedelic fun house that has drawn hundreds of thousands of people to a repurposed bowling alley in midtown Santa Fe. Along the way, Meow Wolf has made millions of dollars and hired hundreds of creative workers.

As the popularity of experiential attractions continues to change the way we take in galleries, museums, and even meals, Meow Wolf stands out for its startling originality and creative vision. It seems poised to continue shaping the immersive experiences upending the art and entertainment industries. In the next few years, Meow Wolf will bring its interactive installations—part amusement parks, part offbeat art exhibits—to cities across the country.

But on the night they christened *The Due Return*, the ragtag artists who had forged a family in Meow Wolf couldn't know where that ship would take them. The group had faith in its work and in its communal process, which walked a thin line between anarchy and organization. But who knew what would come next?

Exhausted and exhilarated, they popped the champagne, raised their glasses, threw their heads back, and howled. Meow Wolf is still howling. And more and more people are listening.

ODAY, FEWER PEOPLE will say, "Meow who?" when you mention Meow Wolf and its *House of Eternal Return*, the dazzling playground that's become both a tourist destination and an incubator for local artists. Opened with funding from *A Game of Thrones* author and Santa Fe arts patron George R.R. Martin, it's a 22,000-square-foot multimedia environment where nearly every room leads to a new dimension. In July 2018, it welcomed its 1 millionth visitor.

Trying to boil down the experience of the *House* has become something of a cottage industry. *The New York Times* pronounced it a "commentary on what's real and what's not in an increasingly 'virtual' age." A TripAdvisor review called it "Burning Man in a bowling alley," referencing another hard-to-pin-down experiment in art and community.

Meow Wolf's creation is one of the most successful examples of what has been referred to as immersive art, which

uses technology, interactivity, and storytelling to create multisensory, participatory experiences. Many of these experiences flourish outside of the traditional frameworks of galleries and museums. But the museum world is by no means immune to the trend.

* DODGEROGRAFICA SER

After visiting Meow Wolf, *Artnet* critic Ben Davis coined the term "Big Fun Art" to describe the phenomenon of art attractions that he rightly predicted would "spread quickly from the margins, putting pressures on museums to embrace it or define themselves against it." Exhibitions are now often curated with at least one eye on how they will appear on social media.

Though the *House of Eternal Return* boasts plenty of selfie-ready scenes, it's all but impossible to capture on film the down-the-rabbit-hole wonder of the place. As everybody keeps telling me, you just have to go.

RIVING FROM DOWNTOWN Santa Fe into midtown, I pass strip malls and fast-food outlets, a far cry from the quaint, narrow streets and curated adobe of the city's historic center. In the beginning, the artists who formed Meow Wolf felt excluded from that somewhat precious world, with its famous Canyon Road galleries. With a population of only about 80,000 people, Santa Fe is home to nearly 300 art galleries and the third-largest art market in the country.

Three years after its 2008 founding, Meow Wolf had about 25 members, all with equal say when it came to decision-making. New members tended to be self-selected, as artists with a similar sensibility would simply begin showing up at meetings. At the time, the collective had dozens of other contributors, with early installations featuring some of what have become the group's hall-marks: a marked science fiction influence, intricate narratives with a psychedelic bent, and a certain child-like glee. It was work that stood in stark contrast with what dominated Santa Fe's galleries.

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"The scene for young emerging artists trying to do something new didn't really exist," founding member Emily Montoya muses in *Origin Story*, the documentary detailing the collective's early struggles and triumphs. Art dealers weren't sure what to do with these sprawling and unusual pieces, which patrons couldn't exactly buy to hang over a sofa. The art world was used to short exhibitions featuring sellable work by one artist. The studio and gallery scene felt completely incompatible with what this collective of radical artists wanted to create.

We're far from that scene as I hang a right at a Taco Bell in midtown. But what might at first appear to be sterile suburban sprawl is in fact a neighborhood on the upswing. The area has long been popvenue and a learning center. Meow Wolf has doled out hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants, sponsorships, and ticket donations, and started a fund to support other DIY art and music spaces. After her election last year, the state's governor even added Kadlubek, Meow Wolf's CEO, to her transition team, as the co-chair of a committee on economic growth.

In the past, Santa Fe, a graying city known in part as a retirement mecca, has struggled to keep young people from moving away, Fecteau says. The success of Meow



Wolf "tells local young people and emerging creatives that they don't have to go to Chicago or Boston or L.A."

Meow Wolf hopes to find similar success in Las Vegas, where its second permanent installation opens later this year. A third will debut in Denver in 2020, with yet another Meow Wolf exhibition planned for Washington, D.C., in 2022. The new venues will feature original work, and the company is hiring local artists in each of those cities. Meow Wolf now employs about 400 people, the majority of whom are under 40, Kadlubek says.

By design, Meow Wolf appeals to a young audience. "If we can build something that is the coolest thing in the world to a 12-year-old, then we're in business," Kadlubek says. "And if it blows their minds, it'll probably blow their parents' minds, too. We respect the adult in the kid, and the kid in the adult."

I'm feeling the kid in me as I pull into the Meow Wolf parking lot, where a 30-foot robot sniffs a daisy, a giant scrap-metal covote stands guard, and a gargantuan spider walks the line (with eight oversized legs) between awesome and unnerving. Inside, I buy my \$25 ticket from an artily scruffy 20-something and head down a



MIRROR ROOMS MULTIPLE

INSTALLATIONS

Yayoi Kusama's most immersive creations date back decades, making the artist both prescient and, in the age of the art selfie, wildly popular. You'll find mirror rooms in the collections of The Broad, in Los Angeles, and Pittsburgh's Mattress Factory.

THIRD RAIL PROJECTS

BROOKLYN, NY

Theatergoers can improvise alongside professional actors while exploring a "set" filled with mind-bending visual flourishes.

ARTECHOUSE MULTIPLE

INSTALLATIONS

These galleries, in Washington, D.C. and Miami, invite visitors to try on VR headsets and hang out in rooms covered with digital projections.

LOS ANGELES EATS ITSELF

MULTIPLE EVENTS

Over several courses, this series fuses art, performance, and food to interpret unsavory stories from L.A.'s past.

ular with artists for its warehouses and low rent, but when Meow Wolf opened its art center here in 2016 in a renovated bowling alley, it "provided a huge anchor for community building and redevelopment," says Loie Fecteau, who recently retired after 15 years as the executive director of New Mexico Arts, the state's arts agency. The last several years have seen the openings of new brewpubs, theaters, and other creative spaces. Meow Wolf's building here includes a music

56 **SOUTHWEST MARCH 2019** MARCH 2019 SOUTHWEST 57 dim hallway into the *House of Eternal Return*. You find your own way through the 70-odd rooms in the exhibition, and I'm not sure where to start. This ability to choose your own adventure, the absolute freedom of the storytelling, is part of the appeal.

Guests first encounter a twostory Victorian home, where you sift through clues to what happened to the family who once lived there. Or you can ignore the storyline completely, and ascribe any meaning you want to the often surreal sights and sounds ahead. The premise allows for rends in the fabric of reality, wormholes into other worlds. Visitors find their way through a number of portals, into dozens of fully imagined universes that feel like the manifestation of the missing family's most far-out thoughts and memories and dreams.

The best known of these portals stands before me. The *House* is already working its magic: This

blocky mainstay of every modern kitchen now seems full of portent and mystery. Through my headphones, I hear the voice of Emily Montoya, one of the original Meow Wolfers. (Audio tours, in which artists talk about the various rooms, are available at the front desk for a small fee.) "When you think about refrigerators, they're actually pretty beautiful and futuristic," she says. "They have that nice, clean Vacuform language going on."

The fridge may be speaking fluent Vacuform, but I'm about to be rendered speechless. Before I can open it, the appliance opens itself. White light silhouettes a human form, and a young woman steps out of the refrigerator and into the kitchen. She's holding an infant in her arms. I half-expect chimes of revelation to sound. The scene is like a modern-day creation myth come to life. I also wonder, Are mother and child hired actors? Are they supposed to be part of the

family who disappeared? Can you even hire a baby?

This place is doing funny things to my brain. Confronted with the underlying message of "Things aren't what they seem," my mind churns out its own stories to try and explain the inexplicable.

I wonder where we come from and where we go after we're gone. I wonder about the family missing from this house. I think of my own father and the psychic signature he left behind when he died a few years ago. What would my family drama look like, manifested in my own *House of Eternal Return*?

ennis Bartels, the former executive director of San Francisco's Exploratorium, the granddaddy of hands-on science museums, uses the term "participatory art" to describe this kind of work. "Nothing happens if you don't activate it," says Bartels, who's now chair of the board of directors at Burning Man. "Maybe

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it's climbing all over the art at Burning Man, or playing with the phenomena at an Exploratorium exhibit. If you just stand there looking at it, you're not getting a tenth of what the experience could be. You only get as much back as you're putting in."

Bartels likes that "there's nothing too precious" in these kinds of environments. "You look at an art museum or gallery in a very different way," he says. "Everything's so valuable that it immediately creates a sort of hands-off feeling."

I feel pretty hands-on as I push through the fridge, heading down a bright, narrow passage that empties into a retro-futuristic travel agency. A couple entering the room looks at me as if they think I'm part of the installation's narrative, someone there to make the experience even weirder.

The hours spin by in a swirl of color, texture, and story. I marvel at how each room bears the stamp of its respective creators, from

preternaturally vivid forests with velvety branches to a black-and-white cartoon room that makes you feel like Betty Boop. I push through more portals, climb into tree houses, and jam on a xylophone made of glow-in-the-dark mastodon bones with a toddler.

Some of the rooms look meticulously planned and executed, while others look as if scavenged treasures were staple-gunned to the wall in a fit of maximalist glee. Sound adds another stratum of sensation: machine noises, eerie music, soundtracks of videos that look like they were made on other planets. I feel my eyes pinwheeling, my brain quaking like Jell-O, my hands reaching out for the next thing to touch.

I exit through the gift shop, the one thing that feels routine about my visit. I, for one, can't resist cool merch, but a question that's been treading water at the edge of my mind swims front and center: What, if anything, did these

radical artists sacrifice by making it big? Kadlubek hasn't been shy about wanting to make Meow Wolf a billion-dollar company.

Meow Wolf's creative impact beyond the art world is undeniable, says Hugh McDonald, executive producer at Ideum, an Albuquerque area company that creates interactive digital exhibits for museums, and for well-known corporations he is reluctant to name. Clients tell him they want their own Meow Wolf, McDonald says. "They're asking for an immersive experience—something outside of the frame."

There's a debate in the art world about these experiences, and whether they qualify as anything more than money-making amusement parks.

Kadlubek bristles at any suggestion that Meow Wolf is too focused on business. "[Critics] say, 'Hey, what are you doing making money off of art? What are you doing participating in capitalism?' But how



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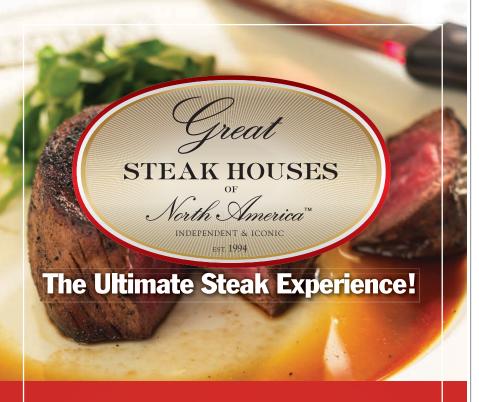
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are we going to change the system if we're not part of it?"

Meow Wolf marketing director John Feins puts it this way: "We want artists to be able to quit their day jobs. To do art full-time."

Finding that balance between Meow Wolf's explosive growth as a business and the rebellious outsider principles of the group's early days has its challenges.

"We want to preserve all we can of collectivism but also be a legit company that people want to invest in," Feins says. "We're in an ongoing conversation. 'Are we staying true to ourselves? Is there a better way to do it?"

One thing's for sure. Meow Wolf won't remain static. There's a sense that the art collective that became a company is a living, breathing creature. Artists involved in the group's projects have referred to Meow Wolf as a beast, with its own agenda, that they are helping bring to life.

Toward the end of my stay at the *House*, I look into another portal, this one edged in what looks like cake icing. It's a hall of mirrors, amplifying an anatomical heart into infinity. The piece, "Cakeland," by the artist Scott Hove, is part of a 2018 update that saw new art introduced to many of the installation's rooms. In an announcement about the addition. Meow Wolf noted, "We haven't just expanded our Multiverse, we've blown it wide open. Maximal is more, and more is what we always want! More interactivity, more sound, more infinity!"

Catching glimpses of myself in the prism of mirrors, I realize that, like all of us, Meow Wolf looks different from every angle. It contains multitudes. And with its continued growth—more visitors, more installations, and more creative exploration—even infinity doesn't seem out of reach.

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