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The reason San Francisco can't get enough Van Gogh, Picasso and Banksy

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Whether it's Legos, Banksy or venerated painters of the past, an immersive exhibition seems to be lurking around every corner in San Francisco.

Popularized by a scene from the mind-numbingly popular 2020 show "[Emily in Paris](#)," these experiences have sold out days — sometimes weeks or months — in advance with visitors waiting in line around blocks for a chance to gain entry into an all-encompassing, digital art-scape.

And, they're big business.

The most recent [Immersive Entertainment Industry Annual Report](#), authored by the founders of [Pseudonym Productions](#), estimated that in 2019, the immersive exhibition industry as a whole was valued at \$61.8 billion. CEO Sarah Elger is working on an updated



COURTESY OF THE KEY

Imagine Picasso: Immersive Exhibit,
Vancouver, British Columbia, 2021

report, but told me that people want to reconnect with each other coming out of the pandemic.

"And that's one of the most unique aspects of immersive experiences," she said. "I think this industry is going to come back so much stronger than ever, as a lot of companies are looking to open brand new experiences, and I really feel like the market's going to be primed for this."

Corey Ross, president of Toronto-based Lighthouse Immersive, which is producing the Immersive Van Gogh exhibit at the SVN West in San Francisco and 19 other cities, told Bloomberg last year that the company has sold more than 3.2 million tickets worldwide, saying it was the biggest single attraction Ticketmaster.

Kevin Kopjak, who ran the marketing efforts of the San Francisco production, told me the exhibit has sold over 470,000 tickets and generated over \$25.4 million in revenue.

All about the venue

One of the most compelling aspects of these experiences are the venues — the interior spaces upon which high-res digital images are projected add depth to the art itself.

Annabelle Mauger, artistic director of the upcoming exhibition Imagine Picasso, which premieres in the U.S. at the San Francisco Armory Feb. 9, said it was important to choose a venue with historical significance to impress upon viewers the sense of admiration for the work and life of the artist.

"It's a building full of unique and rich history. I think it's a perfect venue," she said. "It's a kind of journey you have to go through and it was very important to be in a historic site."

Picasso was an extremely prolific artist — he's thought to have produced more than 50,000 works of art in his lifetime. It would be borderline impossible to see each of his paintings in person. So, projecting of high-resolution reproductions is the next best thing.

Click through the slideshow above for a sneak peek of the Imagine Picasso exhibition making its U.S. debut in San Francisco at the Armory in February.

"The magnificent venue we are in has been vacant throughout Covid," said Jacob Cohl, vice president of experiential/exhibitions at S2BN Entertainment, one of the producers of Imagine Picasso. "Without the pandemic, we may not have had an opportunity to present in such a massive 40,000-square-foot space, allowing us to increase the size and scale of our show. Our exhibition is the largest-of-its-kind to occupy the space and the first time in a while the historic building is being used for a novel experience. We've created a unique presentation specifically for Skylight at The Armory and without it, our show would be very different," he said.

The Armory did not respond to messages for comment.

When Immersive Van Gogh opened at SVN West, formerly known as Fillmore West, locals couldn't help but recall the blending of music and projections that took place there during the Summer of Love in 1967. Toronto producer Corey Ross, who worked on this iteration of the show, told [Marin Living Magazine](#), "I'm a geek of producers and promoters and I'm a big Bill Graham fan, and this room is a sacred space musically from the Grateful Dead and Janis Joplin, but also in terms of the combination of music and projection. We brought this combination of music and projection back to one of the first places where these kinds of things were experimented with."

The economic factor

Much of the revenue generated from these exhibits is pumped back into the local economy — a lifeline for the slowly recovering tourism industry. Visitors likely do not just purchase a ticket to an exhibit and then go back home. Some opt to make a weekend of it and stay at a hotel, patronize restaurants and cafes and participate in other leisure activities.

"For all our immersive exhibitions, we pour literally millions of dollars into the local economy," said Cohl, the Imagine Picasso producer. "Whether it's the chosen venue, marketing or the over 100 local personnel we'll employ from production to promotions, operations and more. One of the main reasons we chose San Francisco for Imagine Picasso's U.S. premiere is because it's a hub for culture. More specifically, our venue Skylight at The Armory is located in the historic Mission District, an iconic neighborhood

with deep cultural roots. Operating our experience in The Mission brings locals and visitors to the surrounding neighborhood, further supporting the surrounding local small businesses like restaurants and shops which is imperative during this challenging pandemic era."

Brenda Tucker, director of arts marketing for SF Travel, the city's main tourism arm, said the organization does not assist actively in the venue selection or setup of these experiences, but it promotes them alongside other cultural happenings all over the city to connect arts-inclined domestic and international travelers to local art destinations.

"I believe that those exhibitions are really interesting and meet the visitor where they are ... that are very safe," she said. "They're in circles and it reinvigorated that former Honda dealership. They attract people to come into the city. And if people come into the city and they stay in a hotel, then they contribute to the economy in San Francisco."

Peer pressure

Local museums, which were upended by the pandemic and had to shut their doors for much of 2020, are taking notice of the success of these exhibits.

Their traditionally lean financial and personnel resources left many of them scrambling to catch up to the expectations of digitally savvy audiences when the lockdown began in March 2020, leading many museum leaders to look to immersive exhibitions as they soared in popularity.

The curatorial team at the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) — Deputy Director of Content and Collections Valerie Huaco, Curator of Art Carin Adams and Director of Content Development Peggy Monahan — said exhibits like the Ice Cream Museum and Immersive Van Gogh "demonstrate the public's interest in joining a creative spectacle."

"Increasingly, museums recognize that visitors learn and enjoy exhibitions in many different ways. Offering spaces that stimulate many of the senses can deepen engagement and offer more ways for visitors to enter into the experience," the curatorial team said in

a joint statement. "That isn't at odds with deeply meaningful, educational and even revelatory presentations. At OMCA, we employ everything from sound and smell to altered perspectives through scale and light to draw visitors into immersive learning. We also use interactives to support social engagement, enriching the experience through human action."

With local museums open again, we're witnessing more and more the inclusion of immersive experiences.

The Asian Art Museum is currently playing host to a Tokyo-based art collective, teamLab who took over 8,500 square feet with their digital landscape that visitors can interact with as they move through images of all sorts of flora and fauna that react to movement.

SFMOMA's Director Neil Benezra commissioned French artist JR to create a large-scale interactive mural that was composed of photographs and audio recordings of real San Franciscans which came to life in his "The Chronicles of San Francisco" on view from 2019-2020.

The San Jose Museum of Art is hosting Hito Steyerl's immersive video installation "Factory of the Sun" (2015) from August 2021 to September 2022.

"Homebody," the Bay Area's largest immersive art experience, is premiering at the Ciel Creative Space in Berkeley.

WHERE THE SHOWS ARE

Immersive Van Gogh Exhibit San Francisco

Venue: SVN West San Francisco (Formerly The Fillmore West)

Dates: Through March 6

About: The U.S. premiere of the Immersive Van Gogh Exhibit from the creators of the blockbuster exhibit seen by over 2 million visitors in Paris. Includes 300,000 cubic feet of projections that animate works of art by van Gogh.

Producer: Toronto-based Lighthouse Immersive

Artistic director: Massimiliano Siccardi

Admission: \$39.99 (for off-peak hours), \$54.99 (for peak hours)

The Art of Banksy

Venue: Palace of Fine Arts

Dates: Nov. 22, 2021–Feb. 27, 2022

About: More than 80 works by the elusive English graffiti artist that did not involve the artist or his representatives — it was brought together by producers Starvox with works in private collections.

Producer: GTP Exhibitions LTD; North American producers: Starvox Exhibits

Admission: \$29.99 for children, \$39.99 for adults, \$49.99 for premium (flexible admission and limited-edition poster), \$79.99 for VIP

The Art of The Brick

Venue: 1 Grant Ave. (former site of the Museum of Ice Cream)

Dates: Dec. 2021–ongoing

About: More than 70 Lego sculptures by artist Nathan Sawaya as well as other Lego sculptures.

Producer: New York-based Running Subway Productions

Admission: \$19 for children, \$27.50 for VIP children, \$21.90 for adults, \$31.70 for VIP adults

Immersive Picasso

Venue: Skylight Studios at the San Francisco Armory

Dates: Feb. 9–March 27

About: More than 200 of Picasso's works of art, including multiple rooms with a didactic introduction on the artist's life and oeuvre.

Producer: France-based Encore Productions, a Fimalac Entertainment Group Company and S2BN Entertainment

Admission: \$19.99 for children, \$39.99 for adults

Monet by the Water

Venue: A statement indicates "a secret location"

Dates: Not yet announced. The show was originally scheduled to open in December 2021.

About: Focus on Claude Monet's art is set to debut in the Bay Area.

Producer: CBF Productions and Mira, the Museum of Immersive Roaming Arts

Admission: Not yet announced

Onedome's "The Unreal Garden"

Venue: 10 South Van Ness Ave., San Francisco (same building hosting the van Gogh Exhibit)

Dates: Ongoing

About: San Francisco-based Onedome is an immersive media company and artist platform that features 20,000 square feet of immersive interiors. San Francisco is the first of Onedome's permanent locations.

Producer: Onedome

Admission: \$30-\$45

Homebody, Bay Area's Largest Immersive Art Experience

Venue: Ciel Creative Space, Berkeley

Dates: Jan. 28-Feb. 20

About: Homebody is an immersive art exhibit that uses augmented reality to bring works to life. Produced by a female-owned and led BIPOC team in collaboration with East Bay community leaders, the exhibit reflects on the human experience of collective isolation and works to harness art and tech to heal the East Bay in the aftermath of Covid.

Producer: Allison Torneros, known in the art world as "Hueman," an artist based in Oakland

Admission: \$50, general admission, \$90 for VIP

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