

THINGS TO DO

July 31 A/E Source: Thomas Wojak: an artist's legacy in Vallejo

The artist's printmaking studio and living space in downtown Vallejo was one of the first of its kind and still going strong



Vallejo artist Thomas Wojak owns and operates The W.O.R.K.S screen printing and mixed medium art studio on Georgia Street in downtown Vallejo. (Chris Riley/Times-Herald)



Walking into Thomas Wojak's storefront live/work space in downtown Vallejo, the first thing in view is art. Drying paper and canvases are arranged on racks, screenprintings and paintings hang on all of the walls and in between are notes from former students and friends. Among all of the works, is the artist and screenprinter himself.

Since 2002, Wojak has lived and worked at 437 Georgia Street in Vallejo. His screenprinting studio, The W.O.R.K.S., specializes in limited edition artists' prints. Since the studio first opened in 1972 in San Francisco, Wojak has worked to create memorable artistic signage and prints across the Bay Area.

But the artist, who found his creative passion young, grew up far away from the bay in Memphis, Tennessee. After living briefly in St. Paul, Minn., as a teenager, Wojak headed South once more and got an undergraduate degree in Memphis.

At the time, Wojak was a Christian Brother, a religious organization that did not support his desire to be an artist full-time, he says. "They let me go to art school as long as I did it on my own time," he said. That's how he got a second bachelor's degree from the Memphis Academy of Arts.

Since he first was drawn to art at 19, Wojak has been dedicated to the craft. It was ceramics that first caught his attention, but when he took screen printing at the Academy of Arts in Memphis, he was hooked. "I got enamored by it," says Wojak.

Eventually he left the Christian Brothers, which he says was for two main reasons. One, he wanted to pursue art full-time. Two, Wojak says he "came to my senses about celibacy. I didn't think that was a good way to live," he laughs. "I made the right decision there."

In 1970, Wojak decided he wanted to live in California, as so many young artists do. He moved to San Francisco without a job and ended up working as a teacher at Sacred Heart Cathedral. In 1972, he opened The W.O.R.K.S. and for the last nearly 53 years, that's been what he's doing.

When Wojak first started the company, before digital printing, screen printing was a versatile medium that allowed for custom signage and designs. "We did everything that could get screenprinted," he says.

In his studio on Georgia Street, Wojak still has many of those original screenprints from the first years of The W.O.R.K.S. One in particular was a poster for a night of entertainment in the Venetian Room of the Fairmont Hotel. The poster listed performers including Ella Fitzgerald.

Leading up to the 2000s, San Francisco placed more and more restrictions on live/work spaces. "We were being booted out of their spaces during the first dot-com boom," remembers Wojak. "I gave up on the city. I said, 'Oh, what city wants artists?'"

The answer was Vallejo.

In 2001, Vallejo passed a live/work ordinance that made it easier for artists to work out of their living spaces. So Wojak and life partner Misty Youmans decided to move to the 707.

When they first moved, there were many more empty storefronts than there currently are downtown, says Wojak. The couple found an abandoned storefront, a couple local contractors and were able to turn the place into the studio and home it is today.

While the front of the space looks like any artist's studio, the back is a complete home, with more personal paintings and cozy touches.

In the front studio space, Youmans' artistic works are mixed in with Wojak's. She is a textile artist and craftswoman herself, in addition to just recently retiring from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as a grant writer.

As Wojak flipped through a big book of his past screenprinting jobs to show the Times-Herald, his more personal artwork stood out on the walls. One recent series is called "Road Trip" and is part photography, screenprint and painting.

Born out of his and Youmans' yearly trips to national parks, the series features photos he's taken turned into screen prints. Sometimes adding a figure he refers to as "the traveling man" or "the walking man." The figure, all black on top of the colorful natural landscape, is a representation of himself, says Wojak.

The goal of his artwork, he says, is "creating a present from fragments of the past."

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