

Mexican artist Ale De La Torre's "Curandera" shows the dream of a witch healer using medicinal herbs. It won first place in The Natural Cannabis Company's High Art Competition in 2020.

HIGH ART

FROM INK DRAWINGS WEAVING WEED INTO A NARRATIVE TO PHOTOS SHOWCASING SURPRISING HUES, CREATIVE TYPES ARE CELEBRATING CANNABIS. BY ERIN BRERETON

➔ The idea that cannabis can enhance creativity is far from new. And while it hasn't been proven, some findings suggest there may be a connection—even if it is simply that creative people are more likely to be open to trying new things, including weed.

A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study found people working in the arts and design, entertainment, sports and media jobs were the

second-most likely to partake in marijuana or hashish, compared to other occupations. And research has shown cannabis use can increase cerebral blood flow to the brain's frontal lobe, which is associated with creativity. A separate 2017 study found cannabis users appeared to demonstrate somewhat enhanced creativity capabilities compared to nonusers.

Cannabis, CBD and art are particularly well-suited, according to Canman (who

goes by a single name à la Banksy), a Massachusetts-based painter and tattoo artist who often depicts weed in his work (canmancreations.com).

"A lot has to do with just being under the influence of cannabis or CBD," he says. "It doesn't really matter whether it's for recreation or medicinal use, it's almost like a tool that elevates your observational skills. It opens people's minds up to other possibilities [and] can



1. Asia Taber finishes a cannabis installation in California.
2. MCF's 2016 exhibit "Altered State: Marijuana in California."
3. The Cannabition Museum in Vegas.
4. An Instagram-worthy sculpture of a giant joint in Cannabition.
5. One of Gavin Spielman's pot-themed logos.
6. Charlotte's Web's 76-acre "Trust the Earth" installation in Kansas.



1

heighten the senses—that sometimes makes people think about the message that's behind the art."

AN INNOVATIVE COMMUNITY

Artists aren't just utilizing cannabis as part of their creative process. In recent years, hemp and marijuana have cropped up in a number of interesting ways in the art world.

Numerous cannabis-themed art shows have been popping up all along the West Coast and nearby locales. "Altered State: Marijuana in California," an exhibition the Oakland Museum of California hosted in 2016, received the Western Museums Association's Charles Redd Center for Western Studies Award for Exhibition Excellence. And Cannabition, a 10,000-square-foot immersive museum in Las Vegas with more than 20 unique cannabis-inspired art installations, opened in 2018.

“It's not such a rebel thing because the population is slowly starting to embrace the benefits of cannabis.”

—CANMAN

Acrylic on canvas works by Massachusetts artist Canman:
1. "Elevate"
2. "Cannabinoid"

Last year, Studio Number One, a Los Angeles-based creative agency, created a 76-acre installation in a Kansas field for hemp company Charlotte's Web to raise awareness of the need for improved access to CBD medicinal products (Kansas severely restricts CBD use). The artwork featured a hand holding a massive hemp stalk, mowed into farmland that totaled more than 50 football fields. "This art is the visual and naturally living embodiment of Charlotte's Web's mission to unleash the healing powers of botanicals," said its CEO Deanie Elsner.

On a smaller scale, puff-and-paint-classes that allow would-be artists to imbibe while they create are popular in states where adult-use pot is legal. Before pandemic shutdowns, Canman was teaching one. He has also hosted a number of live painting exhibitions at cannabis festivals and other events.

"I'll reach out or [organizers] will [contact me] to come out and do live painting; it adds an extra attraction to the event," he says. "Really, that's where the community builds, through events and different types of happenings. COVID put a big kibosh on that—now that there are no events, that kind of shut people off from the momentum they had going."

In-person events may be on hold, but cannabis-related commercial design has seemingly remained in full swing, with numerous companies continuing to tap artists' talent by soliciting original works for product labels and other promotional items.

Some have sought to foster emerging talent in the industry. For the past few years, artists from dozens of countries have submitted entries to the Natural Cannabis Company's annual High Art contest, held to solicit designs for the subscription-based cannabis service's



2



1



2



3

1. "Metaphysical Technology" by U.S. artist Locust won 3rd place at Natural Cannabis Company's 2019 High Art contest.
2. An installation of cannabis plants by Asia Taber.
3. Canada's Steve Coleman took 4th in the 2019 NCC contest with "Hare E Houdini."

product packaging. In addition to a \$15,000 grand prize, the company makes a \$10,000 charitable donation to a cause of the artist's choosing. The five 2020 winners' creations ranged from whimsical Alice-in-Wonderland-esque themes to mystical imagery. "The love of art and the love of cannabis are shared experiences that people experience uniquely," said company founder Dona Frank. "It's amazing to see that in the perspective of so many cultures."

And in 2016, Canadian-based marijuana company Tweed launched a cannabis artist-in-residence program to provide an outlet for weed-related artistic expression. Its first artist-in-residence, documentary filmmaker and photographer Ezra Soiferman, created photography-based projects about cannabis-related subjects in the cities and towns where Tweed operates.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Although Gavin Spielman, who teaches oil painting and drawing at New York's

Parsons School of Design, primarily focused on a fairly classical style for much of his career, he found cannabis-related design gigs began flooding in about three years ago. "My oil work tends to be more in the tradition of the Hudson River [School of] painters and impressionists," he says. "It's totally different; that's why I got into this. I started putting [pieces in a separate artistic style] online and right away, maybe within a week, I got commissions. That hasn't stopped."

Spielman is no stranger to the cannabis and CBD world. He first became interested in hemp after reading about its benefits as a child in the 1980s. During a trip to Amsterdam in the 1990s, he started thinking the art he was creating at the time—more comic-like, and somewhat psychedelic—might lend itself to the cannabis community. "That was back in '92," he says. "I'm just now really doing it full-time."

Working under the moniker Green Pine Tree, which is also the name of his design company, Spielman has since

created items for seed and nutrient companies, CBD and hydroponics providers, and other businesses. He's done all manner of logos and promotional items in a style he describes as hatchy and detail-oriented—akin to Robert Crumb's work, "with a very '60s and '70s flair" (You can see his work at greenpinetree.com).

While he still teaches and paints, that has taken a back seat to his cannabis design clients; he estimates today it's about a 70/30 split, favoring more cannabis art. "A lot of times [companies] come to me because they don't know what they want but like the energy behind my work," Spielman says. "I'm blessed in this stage of my career to have a little control. Most clients say, 'Do what you're going to do; I love your work.' That's what I love about this industry—they're much more relaxed [than others]."

CHANGING PERCEPTION THROUGH ART

Asia Taber was somewhat of a latecomer to the cannabis realm; she wasn't really

into smoking when she met her husband, who works in the cannabis field.

"I was an athlete at the time and almost had a stigma that it was bad for me, I won't touch it," Taber says. "The first time I smoked, I got dry mouth and the munchies and was like, 'I'd rather just go for a run, this sucks.' It wasn't until I met my partner 10 years ago [that I understood] the medicinality of the plant. He was like, 'Oh, you were smoking bad weed.' It was all history from there."

As Taber began to appreciate the plant's calming properties, she also started to notice a number of photos and ads she'd come across for cannabis were sending an odd message.

"It made me feel a certain way—and it wasn't good," she says. "Being a female that uses daily, seeing highly sexualized images of women as the predominant way of advertising cannabis made me feel like I wanted to do my own thing."

Taber found an artistic outlet that would allow her to counter some of the depictions she'd seen when her husband

began working as a cannabis cultivator in a new downtown L.A. location. She asked if she could help with the organization's Instagram posts and started spending days off from her job as a special education teacher shooting vivid, often unexpected photos of cannabis plants.

Within a few years, an assistant she'd hired convinced Taber she should be more of a presence in the work. "She said, 'A lot of people are asking about you,'" Taber says. "I was a little weirded out about it. She made me realize people want to connect with the artist because they wanted to know who's putting this stuff that's new out there."

In addition to her initial work, Taber has branched out to partner with other companies and brands through her company, High Pilot (highpilotdesign.com). She also recently began offering prints of her work online—and has been amazed at the reaction the images she previously shared on social media have received.

"From early on, I wanted my art to help people break through that personal,

cultural or family stigma, or whatever it was, to help them realize it's not a bad plant, and people using it should not be put in a box," Taber says. "If somebody [who] isn't a cannabis user happens to scroll by one of my images, [and thinks], 'Whoa, is that weed?'—boom; they're pausing and questioning everything they thought of cannabis before. That's exactly what I'm trying to do with my art."

Canman expects the demand for cannabis-related art like the works he and Taber create—in tandem with a general acceptance of cannabis—could grow as more states legalize marijuana.

It's a trend he's already seen in his tattooing work, where he notes there's more interest in cannabis-related styles than a decade or two ago.

"People are more open to it," he says. "Tattoos are a great example; they weren't embraced by the mainstream for a long time. It's very normal now. Maybe 10 years down the road we'll see that with cannabis. It takes time to change people's minds."