Uncovering historic Boston's contemporary art scene

As the cradle of the American Revolution, Boston has long upheld a rather historic, high-brow reputation. Dig deeper and you'll find a bold and brilliant contemporary art scene beneath the city's red-brick exterior.

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By Connor McGovern
“And when I die, they’ll cremate me and inter me beneath the floorboards!”

Debby Krim shares her funeral plans with more passion than most. Not that she’s morbid — far from it. She’s positively effusive as she shows me around her studio at SoWa Artists Guild, darting here and there with all the excitable pride of a first-time mother. She presents her paintings, photography and jewellery, all the while her self-designed scarf fluttering behind her. “I’ve travelled all over the world and there’s nowhere I love more than here,” she says with a grin. Forget the next world, I think; Debby seems happy enough in this one.

A self-described realist painter and abstract photographer, Debby is one of more than 100 artists who work and exhibit in the renovated warehouses of SoWA, in Boston’s South End. “It was gutted when we first moved in 15 years ago,” she...
Corridors are plastered with posters and the floorboards — the ones Debby has earmarked for the afterlife — creak like a Hollywood haunted house. It feels full of creativity, as if all the artists’ paint and ink have seeped into the foundations and brought the old building back to life.

As she stops to chat with fellow artists, it’s as though Debby’s showing me around her home rather than her office. “It’s a family here,” she tells me. Many artists based on trendy Newbury Street went elsewhere when big-name brands started moving in from the 1970s. “And that’s why the Guild was created: to get everyone together and share ideas.”

We meander on through SoWa’s galleries, admiring the fruits of those shared ideas: there’s glasswork and handmade dresses, huge, vintage-style posters, furniture and fine art. It’s quiet now, but the SoWa Open Market, held every Sunday in the summer, sees hundreds flock here to browse the artwork. I ask her about the rest of Boston’s art scene outside of this arty little enclave of SoWa. “It’s definitely down to earth. It’s not snobby or elite,” says Debby, earrings jangling as she shakes her head.

Artist Daisy St Sauveur.
PHOTO BY JUAN ARREDONDO

Change is gonna come

After a browse of SoWa’s Vintage Market (held every Sunday in the warehouses’ basement), I stroll through the South End, passing blossom-littered squares and Boston’s famous, red-brick rowhouses. There’s a carefree air to the city this morning: cafe doorbells jingle as locals grab coffee ‘to go’, and runners are out in
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BOSTON DRINKERS. Founded in 1630, the capital of Massachusetts is one of America’s oldest cities, its citizens having played a pivotal role in the US fight for independence. History is writ large throughout the city, particularly in Downtown, where the much-trodden Freedom Trail testifies to a revolutionary past of battles, speeches and treaties. These days, however, the city’s seeing a revolution of the more artistic kind.

“We like to say: ‘The Revolution Will Be Instagrammed’, ” laughs Rachel Charles of The Revolution Hotel. Housed in what was once one of the country’s first YMCAs, it’s been reborn as a hip hotel with a slightly irreverent streak. “Boston has such an incredible, rich history and so we wanted to blend all that heritage with modern art.”

The result is a Banksy-esque homage to Boston: a colourful, wraparound mural with the faces of US revolutionaries brightens up the lobby, while a pillar covered in made-in-Massachusetts exports like Converse shoes and plastic lawn flamingos toasts the state’s innovations. Toilets are decked out like local subway stations, and walls are adorned with Red Sox memorabilia and LPs by Boston-born Donna Summer. Because if there’s one thing Bostonians are more proud of than their nation-shaping history, it’s their baseball team.

But in a city so rooted in the past, what about the present? I head to the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (MassArt), to meet some of the bright young things busy sketching the Boston of today.

“I’d turn the lights on but they’re burnt out,” jokes printmaking student Daisy St Sauveur, as she clears some space on her ink-smeared, paper-strewn desk in her “lair”.

“At the moment, I’m working with the theme of American pop culture and the
pop culture herself with her vintage sports jacket and banana-patterned T-shirt as she leafs through her portfolio of prints — all *Miami Vice* blues and pinks. I ask if she plans to move elsewhere after graduation. “Well, my allegiance is here now,” she says, reflecting on the past three years. “The scene here has just changed so much — and for the better. It’s more contemporary, and art here is no longer just the classic old oil paintings. I see Boston as a real collage of a city these days.”

In many ways, MassArt reflects this versatility. The school, which was the first art college in the country to offer degrees in 1873, today caters to disciplines as diverse as stop-motion animation and art history. But despite its age, the college looks ever forwards in its role as Boston’s foremost art school, with a new contemporary gallery set to open in 2020.

Illustration student Biana Bova also spares me five minutes from her manic schedule. “Sorry, it’s a crazy time,” she laughs, leading me to her desk. In the throes of finalising her portfolio for an exhibition, Biana is full of jumpy excitement. “There are opportunities galore in this city,” she enthuses. “It’s not cut-throat at all, which isn’t the case in a city like New York. I know a bunch of us students who’ve got jobs at local galleries, and one guy I know has even started designing the cans for a local brewery.”

Biana flicks through her fun digital illustrations, which pop with bright colours, before telling me about upcoming commissions, her YouTube channel and looming deadlines. If she’s at all stressed, her enthusiasm does a good job of hiding it.
Boating on the Charles River.

PHOTO BY JUAN ARRE DONDO

Smart attack

It's not until I cross the choppy Charles River that I can really see Daisy's 'collage of a city'. From the river's northern edge, Boston spreads outwards and upwards: pockets of trees and the rowhouses of Beacon Hill, chimneys, steeples, domes; all backed by glassy high-rises. Here, I've officially stepped into Boston’s annex city, Cambridge to meet Angele Maraj from Off The Beaten Path on a food-and-art-themed walk.

“Cambridge has had a bit of an identity crisis,” she says. “Academic, residential, industrial — it’s been a little bit of everything.” A city of scholars, Cambridge first grew around the lawns of Harvard University, the first in the US when established in 1636. By the 19th century, the city had become one of New
fabric that evidently defines Cambridge today as we walk along Massachusetts Avenue, passing falafel joints and Indian restaurants, bookshops and student hangouts.

After fuelling up on a grilled cheese sandwich at Roxy’s, a local mini-franchise born out of a food truck start-up, we stop in front of a huge violet wall, embellished with Sanskrit script the colour of hot embers. “It says ‘greatness is measured by heart, not background’, ” Angele explains. “I like this one; it really sets the tone for Cambridge.”

The city is awash with similarly vibrant art, from murals of multicultural gatherings to tarted-up street-side electricity cabinets. “Local students decorate these,” Angele explains. “The authorities here don’t want people to hide their art; they want to encourage people to tell their stories.”

Next stop: Graffiti Alley, the only place in town where expressing yourself through the medium of an aerosol can is legal. “You’ve gotta spray with conviction,” one of the artists tells me through his mouth mask. I give it a go, my peace sign ending up more of a kidney-shaped blob than anything else.

A little further south sits another of Boston’s world-renowned universities, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where I meet Mark Linga from the MIT List Visual Arts Center and admit it’s a surprise to be at MIT in pursuit of art rather than science. Mark nods, almost forgivingly. “You’re right; it’s a bit of a surprise to most.”

The Center opened in 1950 as the Hayden Gallery to curate and promote the growing collection of art at MIT. These days, exhibitions are held throughout the year, and pieces from its collection are loaned to students to display in their
We like to think of this as Boston’s hidden sculpture park,” says Mark as he leads me around the campus. It’s a treasure trail of modern masterpieces, a who’s who of 20th-century creativity: there’s Anthony Gormley’s Chord, a molecular column that tumbles down an atrium; and Anish Kapoor’s Non-Object (Plane), a giant concave mirror in the Ray and Maria Stata Center, a fantastical, Frank Gehry-designed building. Elsewhere are sculptures by Moore and Picasso, but perhaps most intriguing is Olafur Eliasson’s Northwest Passage. Suspended from the ceiling, a series of glowing hoops cast yellow light onto amorphous, stainless steel panels.

“Interpret it how you like,” says Mark as we crane our necks to admire it, “but you didn’t even notice this when we walked past.” He smiles. I hadn’t, but now I’m transfixed by its abstract, slightly eerie form. “I think that’s the point of this piece,” Mark says. “Eliasson’s addressing the melting Arctic ice. It’s inconvenient, uncomfortable. We don’t easily see it up there because we’re so divorced from our place in nature.”

Suddenly, I feel a twinge of guilt, staring up at myself in the mirror-like puddles. It’s smart, clever. Apt art in this city of scholars.
Boston's top art hotspots

Best for cutting-edge cool: Institute of Contemporary Art

The nucleus of Boston’s modern art scene cuts a boxy, modernist dash on the waterfront, as part of the ever-expanding Seaport District. ICA’s main building hosts a calendar of thought-provoking exhibitions on all kinds of visual art but catch a water shuttle over to the ICA Watershed for large-scale installations. Don’t miss the museum shop either, with its excellent art books, gadgets and gifts.

Best for community spirit: Fort Point Arts Community
diverse artistic collectives in New England. Stop by the Artists Building on Summer Street for guest-curated, mixed-media exhibitions, and check the FPAC website for October dates of the Open Studios, when the public can meet the artists at work.

**Best for a classic collection:** *Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum*

Taking its name from the bohemian, 19th-century art collector who once lived here, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is set within a lavish, Venetian-style palazzo. The artwork on display includes Rembrandts, Titians and medieval stained glass, while the lush courtyard, filled with statues and colourful blooms, is just as beautiful as the art itself.

**Best for sculpture vultures:** *Boston Sculptors Gallery*

Right in the heart of the SoWa Art + Design District, this sleek space on Harrison Avenue is one of the leading showcases of three-dimensional art in the city. Originally founded by 18 local sculptors in 1992, the gallery’s grown to 37 members, so expect the cream of Boston-based talent here, both emerging and established, with monthly exhibitions (two artists exhibit per month).

**Best for a highbrow hit:** *Museum of Fine Arts*

The fifth-largest museum in the US boasts a 450,000-strong collection of art works that’s little short of staggering. Lose yourself along a timeline spanning ancient Egyptian artifacts to modern American art, via French post-impressionism, a number of Dutch masterpieces and the most extensive museum collection of Japanese works in the world outside Japan.
Photography was your thing? Head to Panopticon, one of the oldest photography galleries in the US, opened in 1971. It offers a first-class showcase for photographic talent from across the globe, from the classic to the contemporary. It’s changed locations a number of times in its near-50-year history, but you’ll find it in the grand Hotel Commonwealth.

**Best for a walk in the park: Rose Kennedy Greenway**

Back in the 1990s, traffic that had passed along a tangle of freeways and flyovers was diverted underground. Part of this disused highway is now the Greenway, a 1.5-mile ribbon of park that doubles as an open-air art gallery, displaying installations, sculptures and murals. Free events are also staged here year-round, from film screenings to exercise classes.

**Best for neighbourhood vibes: Somerville**

For some local flavour, make your way to this town to the northwest of Boston, where a former storage facility has been transformed into Bow Market — a hip collection of boutiques, studios and canteens. From there, jump on the bus to Davis Square and catch a film at the kitschy, independent cinema, Somerville Theatre.
Getting there & around

Fly direct to Boston with American Airlines, British Airways, Delta and Virgin Atlantic from Heathrow; Norwegian from Gatwick; and Aer Lingus from Dublin. Delta also flies direct from Edinburgh and Dublin, and Virgin Atlantic from Manchester in the summer.

Average flight time: 7h.

Boston is largely walkable, but its transport system, nicknamed the T, is extensive. Opt for a top-uppable CharlieCard, on which single fares are $1.70 (£1.30) on buses and $2.25 (£1.70) on the subway.
Spring and autumn average around 15-20°C. Summers can peak in the high-20Cs, while the long New England winters can be snowy. Note that the city and its hotels are particularly busy around the Boston Marathon (20 April in 2020).

More info

massholiday.co.uk

bostonusa.com

cambridgeusa.org

How to do it

Norwegian offers direct return flights from Gatwick on its new Boeing 787 Dreamliners from £260.

The Revolution Hotel has en suite doubles (called King and Queen rooms) from $150 (£119), room only.

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