

MEOW WOLF

Santa Fe's newest art installation offers an out-of-this-world experience

BY ASHLEY M. BIGGERS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GABRIELLA MARKS

Last March, an unassuming former bowling alley in Santa Fe reopened as Meow Wolf Art Complex, which features the “House of Eternal Return,” a high-concept permanent art installation that’s fast becoming a popular destination for locals and visitors. It’s an immersive, interactive display—a world unto itself where visitors can crawl through a fireplace, walk through a refrigerator, hang out in a tree house, drive an upended school bus, and play sculpted, light-up mushrooms like bongos.

The journey begins in a Victorian house where, according to the story that guides visitor explorations, a family has mysteriously disappeared after a break in the space-time continuum. To discover its fate, visitors venture into alternate dimensions.

Meow Wolf, a local artist collective, acquired the 20,000-square-foot space on Santa Fe’s south side and created this world in part thanks to the \$2.7 million backing of George R. R. Martin, Santa Fe author of the *Game of Thrones* book series and TV spin-off. Since then, the group has built an exhibit the scale and ingenuity of which Santa Fe—and perhaps the U.S.—has never seen before.

Meow Wolf first formed in 2008 as an outlet for young, local artists who wanted to put their stamp on Santa Fe’s fine-art and museum-dominated art scene. They created installations around town before, as with “The Due



Return,” an interdimensional ship at the Center for Contemporary Arts, but the Meow Wolf Art Complex is the group’s latest and loftiest effort. Along with the “House of Eternal Return,” Meow Wolf includes a performance venue, nonprofit art education, and maker spaces. It’s a testament to the innovation, storytelling, and tenacity of its creators. Here’s a sampling of a few of the 135 members of the artist collective who imagined the space from idea to reality.

EMILY MONTOLYA

AGE: 32

HOMETOWN: Santa Fe

KNOWN FOR: Graphic design and installation art

CONTRIBUTION: One of the co-creators of the company, Montoya has been a member of Meow Wolf since its start. Montoya, along with Meow Wolf co-founder Benji Geary, designed the element Portals Bermuda—an interdimensional travel agency inspired by *Star Trek* and *The Fifth Element* (with a futuristic white

dome and automated proximity door to prove it). More than 40 artists had a hand in creating the environment where a hologram hostess invites visitors to travel to other fictional worlds. Montoya says the biggest challenge for Portals Bermuda—and the project as a whole—was communicating with so many artists of different disciplines, from the tech team, to the sound team, to the fabrication team.





JUSTIN DI IANNI

AGE: 36

HOMETOWN: Long Valley, New Jersey

KNOWN FOR: Architecture, design-build fabrication

CONTRIBUTION: With his brother Sean Di Ianni as one of Meow Wolf's original members, it seems inevitable that Justin Di Ianni would be drafted into the project for his skills in digital modeling and fabrication (as with a computer-like machine that can cut, drill, and shape like traditional tools). He helped fabricate the dome for Portals Bermuda, working in Meow Wolf's shop while the bowling alley was under renovation. Though the dome was meant to come apart, the team ultimately had to disassemble it, along with part of the shop's garage door, before installing the dome in its final home. Di Ianni also helped fabricate the facade of the Victorian house and roof.

PAUL GROETZINGER

AGE: 36

HOMETOWN: Rowayton, Connecticut

KNOWN FOR: Record label Mesa Recordings and as DJ Feathericci

CONTRIBUTION: Groetzinger and his collaborators designed the sound for the house's global spaces. Before the bowling alley was remodeled, they recorded sounds in the space, such as banging on pipes, blending them into the ambient noise for the "House of Eternal Return." On his honeymoon in Thailand, Groetzinger also recorded jungle, beach, and cave noises, which blended into background sounds for common spaces. For specific elements such as the Desert Trailer, located in one of the alternate dimensions, he drew upon recorded and voice noises and sampled desert sounds, such as coyote howls. Groetzinger layered the sounds subtly so all seemed as though they were coming from the same space. He blended the sounds throughout the entire installation by composing in a relative key and using the same beats per minute. As Groetzinger explains, "It feels good in your body. You're still bobbing your head as you move from one space to the other."





MATTHEW FERNANDEZ

AGE: 26

HOMETOWN: Albuquerque

KNOWN FOR: Programming, game development, hardware electronic design

CONTRIBUTIONS: As a member of the tech team, Fernandez helped artists bring their wildest imaginations to life.

Installation artist and Meow Wolf co-founder

Golda Blaise created a field of mushrooms from instamorph (moldable thermo plastic that looks a bit like wax) that blossom from tree trunks.

Thanks to the tech team's skills, the mushrooms light up and, when hit like a drum, emit sound. Fernandez helped wire and program the electrical system that makes the mushrooms dynamic. He also helped to build another interactive music element: the laser harp. In a pitch-black room, red laser "strings" stretch from floor to ceiling. When visitors break the laser beams, the strings play a sound, creating instant compositions in this one-of-a-kind art space.



IF YOU GO

Meow Wolf is open daily except Tuesdays. Hours vary; see website. Admission is \$10–\$18. 1352 Rufina Circle, Santa Fe. (505) 780-4458; meowwolf.com.

ERIKA WANENMACHER

AGE: 61

HOMETOWN: Cleveland

KNOWN FOR: Sculptor, installation artist, and all-around maker of things

CONTRIBUTION: Wanenmacher conceptualized and built a 12-foot diameter "animal eyeball dome" with visual representations of various animals including a snake, octopus, horse, goat, and whale. It's a project she'd envisioned for several years before it found a home in the Meow Wolf Art Complex. Wanenmacher created a second sculpture, *Raven Oracle*, specifically for the "House of Eternal Return." The 6-foot-tall animatronic bird perches on a ledge in the forest from which it recites, "a bunch of phrases that are pithy, bombastic, and weird," Wanenmacher says. Even after 43 years as a professional artist, the "House of Eternal Return" presented Wanenmacher an opportunity to experiment. She created the raven out of cold-forged steel, working on an anvil and custom shaping forms—a technique she'd never used before.



To see more photos of Meow Wolf visit AAA.com/newmexico/journey

Albuquerque-based freelancer Ashley M. Biggers is eager to get back to Meow Wolf to play the mushroom drums.