

Hec One Love, Love Harder. Photo by author: © Alfredo Garcia.

Free Art

By Alfredo Garcia

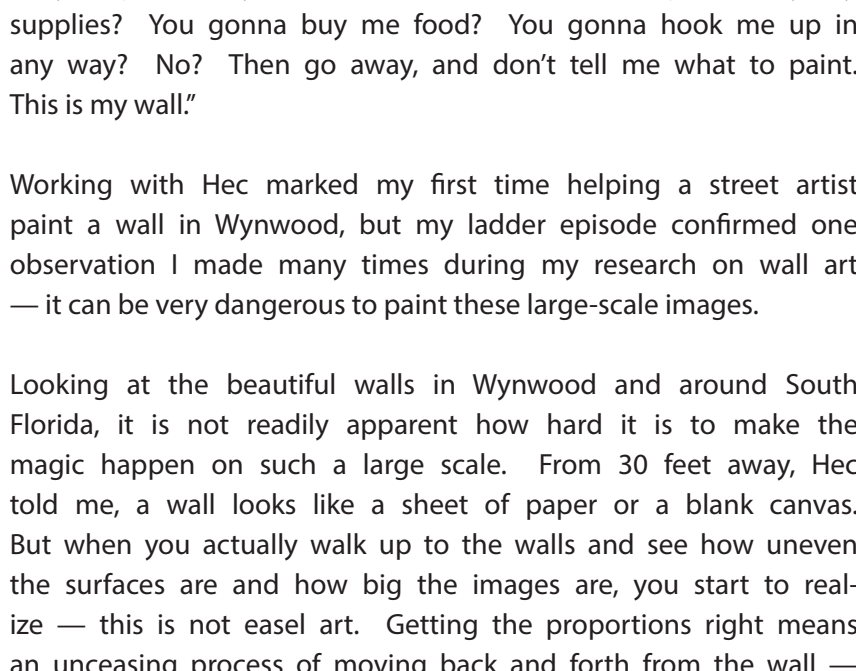
“Put that in your story, bro. Put that in your friggin’ story. I do this for free, you get me? Free?”

I had just fallen off the top of a 9-foot ladder while helping Hec One Love, a local Miami artist, paint one of the walls in the Wynwood Art District — an expansive wall with an abstract background and lettering that read, “Love Harder.”

We had been working since 9:00 am, putting up chalk lines and painter’s tape to create straight, crisp, and clean white lettering on an abstract spray-painted background. We measured every line with absolute precision — 22 ¾ inches from the top of the wall to the top of the letter; five inches for the thickness of the letters’ legs; from here to there was 15 inches while from over there to here was seven inches.

I was amazed by Hec’s attention to details. It was a whole day of: “Line it up. Snap the line. Do it again. Use the tape. Careful, bro, that line isn’t straight enough. Nice, that’s a nice line. Nice, that’s badass.” We spent several minutes with each piece of tape; every single line was painstakingly created.

At some point during the day, I was up at the top of the ladder working on one of the letters, when I felt the ladder creeping onto its two side legs. Sure, I wasn’t supposed to stand above the step that was two from the top. Sure, I wasn’t supposed to be on the tips of my toes while standing at the very top. But Miamians are not known for following the rules, and street art doesn’t really care about “safety first.”



The author up on the ladder helping Hec One Love. Photo by author: © Alfredo Garcia.

I grabbed the ladder and gave a little yell. I was balancing in the air with all my weight on the two outer legs. The ladder swayed slowly and I was 28 feet off the ground. It felt like an eternity, but eventually I fell away from the wall and onto a parked car. “I guess this is how it ends,” I thought.

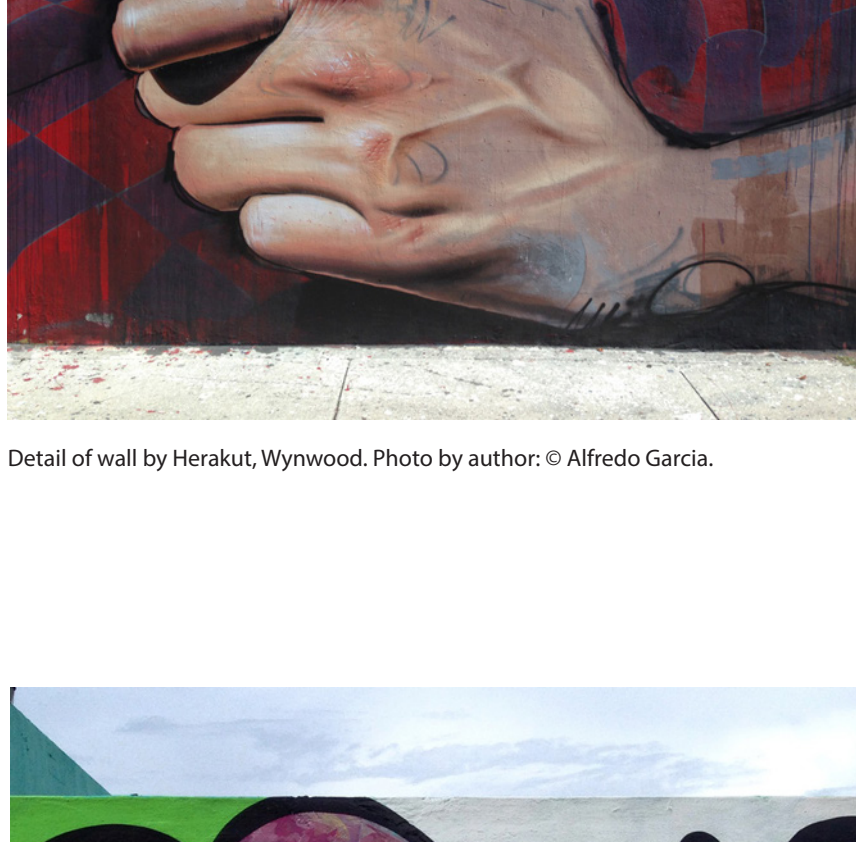
But Hec arrived at the penultimate moment and caught the ladder. I fell more slowly as a result, and landed softly on the car. It felt like a Spiderman move: nothing bad happened to the car, nothing happened to me, and everything—except my dignity—was safe.

He takes these kinds of risks for free, Hec reminded me. “You think that she [the lady who owns the business behind the wall] offered to pay me anything? No way, man. She just comes up to me and asks me if I’m going to fix it up for Basel. Oh really? So you gonna pay me for the wall? No? You gonna buy my supplies? You gonna buy me food? You gonna hook me up in any way? No? Then go away, and don’t tell me what to paint. This is my wall.”

Working with Hec marked my first time helping a street artist paint a wall in Wynwood, but my ladder episode confirmed one observation I made many times during my research on wall art — it can be very dangerous to paint these large-scale images.

Looking at the beautiful walls in Wynwood and around South Florida, it is not readily apparent how hard it is to make the magic happen on such a large scale. From 30 feet away, Hec told me, a wall looks like a sheet of paper or a blank canvas. But when you actually walk up to the walls and see how uneven the surfaces are and how big the images are, you start to realize — this is not easel art. Getting the proportions right means an unceasing process of moving back and forth from the wall — climbing the ladder, spraying paint for a while, climbing down the ladder, stepping way back for a look, and then climbing back up again. Repeat dozens of times over many hours, and that’s how a wall gets painted.

Getting at hard to reach spots means leaning out far from the ladder, risking your body for the sake of the wall. “You got health insurance, right?” Hec joked when I started to work on the wall. “Yah, school pays for it,” I told him. “Okay good,” he said. “Then that means you get up the ladder. I don’t have insurance.”

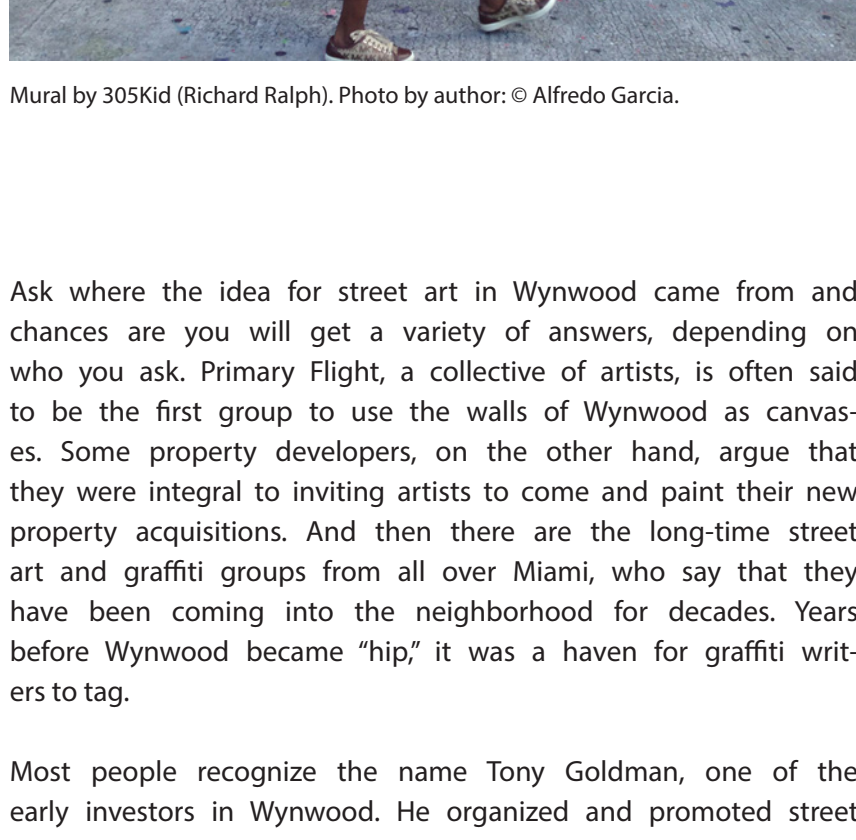


Hec One Love at work on his Love Harder wall in Wynwood. Photo by author: © Alfredo Garcia.

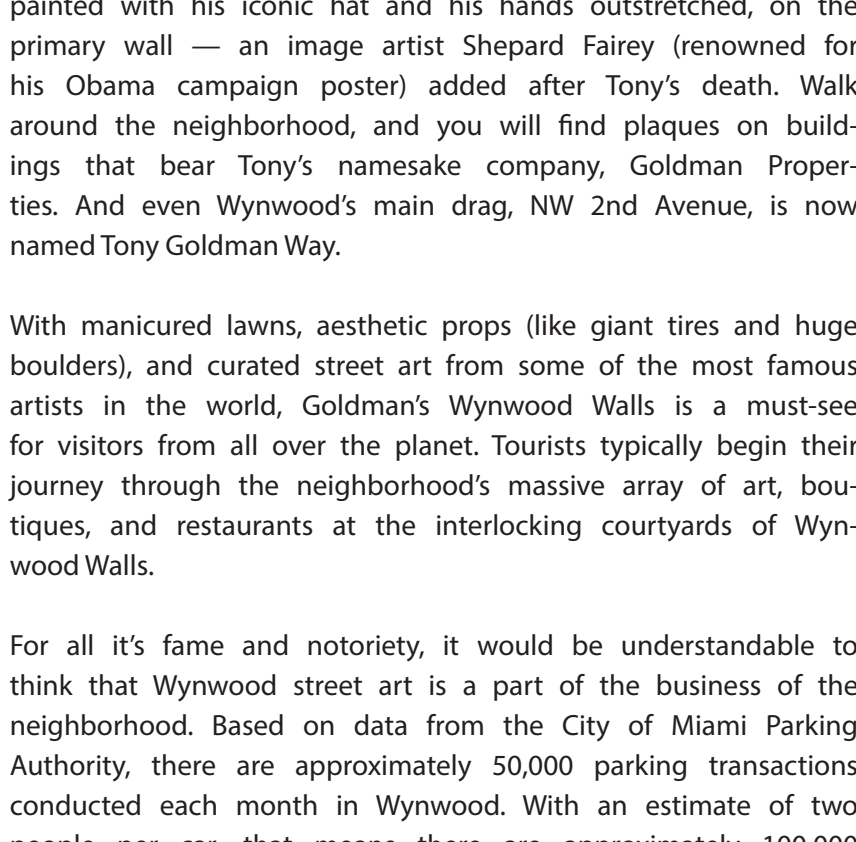
But beyond the difficulty and danger of painting the walls, there was another observation that I made time and time again — most of these walls, surprisingly enough, are painted for free.

When I began my research in Wynwood, I assumed that the walls were all commissioned pieces that were paid for by the businesses behind the walls. I thought the artists would get paid for their work while the businesses would benefit from more sales due to the increased foot traffic the art would generate.

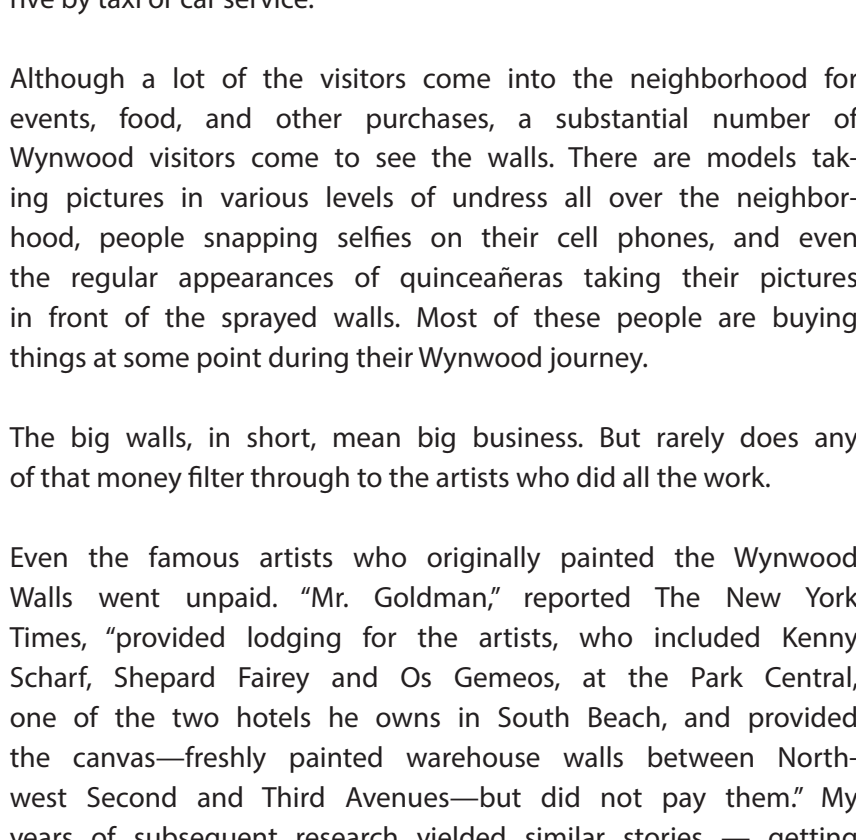
After more than 100 interviews with street artists, business owners, property developers, and others involved in the Wynwood Art District, I can attest that the massive painted walls, which bring in a tremendous amount of revenue to the neighborhood, are created by artists who rarely get paid.



Detail of wall by Herakut, Wynwood. Photo by author: © Alfredo Garcia.



Detail of wall by Jenny Perez, Wynwood. Photo by author: © Alfredo Garcia.



Mural by 305Kid (Richard Ralph). Photo by author: © Alfredo Garcia.

Ask where the idea for street art in Wynwood came from and chances are you will get a variety of answers, depending on who you ask. Primary Flight, a collective of artists, is often said to be the first group to use the walls of Wynwood as canvases. Some property developers, on the other hand, argue that they were integral to inviting artists to come and paint their new property acquisitions. And then there are the long-time street art and graffiti groups from all over Miami, who say that they have been coming into the neighborhood for decades. Years before Wynwood became “hip,” it was a haven for graffiti writers to tag.

Most people recognize the name Tony Goldman, one of the early investors in Wynwood. He organized and promoted street art in the neighborhood. There’s almost a saint-like quality to the stories about Tony, who passed away in 2012 after years of property development and neighborhood investment. Visit the famous Wynwood Walls and you will find an image of Tony, painted with his iconic hat and his hands outstretched, on the primary wall — an image artist Shepard Fairey (renowned for his Obama campaign poster) added after Tony’s death. Walk around the neighborhood, and you will find plaques on buildings that bear Tony’s namesake company, Goldman Properties. And even Wynwood’s main drag, NW 2nd Avenue, is now named Tony Goldman Way.

With manicured lawns, aesthetic props (like giant tires and huge boulders), and curated street art from some of the most famous artists in the world, Goldman’s Wynwood Walls is a must-see for visitors from all over the planet. Tourists typically begin their journey through the neighborhood’s massive array of art, boutiques, and restaurants at the interlocking courtyards of Wynwood Walls.

For all its fame and notoriety, it would be understandable to think that Wynwood street art is a part of the business of the neighborhood. Based on data from the City of Miami Parking Authority, there are approximately 50,000 parking transactions conducted each month in Wynwood. With an estimate of two people per car, that means there are approximately 100,000 people visiting Wynwood each month. And this is a conservative estimate because many cars arrive with more than two people, and many people choose not to pay for parking, or arrive by taxi or car service.

Although a lot of the visitors come into the neighborhood for events, food, and other purchases, a substantial number of Wynwood visitors come to see the walls. There are models taking pictures in various levels of undress all over the neighborhood, people snapping selfies on their cell phones, and even the regular appearances of quinceañeras taking their pictures in front of the sprayed walls. Most of these people are buying things at some point during their Wynwood journey.

The big walls, in short, mean big business. But rarely does any of that money filter through to the artists who did all the work.

Even the famous artists who originally painted the Wynwood Walls went unpaid. “Mr. Goldman,” reported The New York Times, “provided lodging for the artists, who included Kenny Scharf, Shepard Fairey and Os Gemeos, at the Park Central, one of the two hotels he owns in South Beach, and provided the canvas—freshly painted warehouse walls between Northwest Second and Third Avenues—but did not pay them.” My years of subsequent research yielded similar stories — getting a spot in the Wynwood Walls meant a good time, a nice party, and a lot of recognition, but it did not come with any kind of monetary compensation.

Some artists do get paid. There are sponsored walls like those from the Beck’s Urban Canvas Project, or the street art advertisements commissioned by Occulto beer. Other artists are able to negotiate some kind of payment for their work, especially if the business or property owner wants a particular image or scene on their walls.

Overall, however, most of the walls are created without compensation for the artist. A patron may sponsor an artist’s supplies or pay for a mechanical lift, but the money rarely exceeds these sorts of “hookups.” Time and again the message is the same — if you want a wall in Wynwood, you better be ready to hook it up yourself.

So why do so many artists decide to work for free? Part of the reason is the ever-present link between street art and graffiti writing. Although the past two decades has seen a surge of street art legitimacy (think of the millions of dollars that are spent every year on pieces by Banksy, Shepard Fairey, and others), street art still has much in common with the graffiti subculture. Graffiti is illegal, something done in the dark of night. As a result, graffiti is painted for free.

Another reason artists work for free is that Wynwood is an internationally recognized showcase for street art. Artists far and wide seek Wynwood wall space to exhibit their work. No matter how secluded, hidden, or off the beaten path the wall might be, artists actively seek to get a piece of the neighborhood. With the huge demand for walls, property and business owners are able to call the shots. Want my wall? That’s fine, but I’m not going to pay you.

Walking around the neighborhood one day, I came across a painting session at a wall just across from Panther Coffee, a central gathering place featuring excellent, store-roasted coffee. I asked the wall artists my usual set of questions: where are you from, what are you doing, what’s your story, etc. But when my questions turned to payment, they just pointed at a man sitting nearby, chatting with a woman. “Talk with him,” they said.

I recognized him as a gallery owner. His business, near Gramps, is off the beaten path of the neighborhood, but he and his family have been active in Wynwood for many years. I knew who he was, even though he may not have known me.

“Do you pay the wall artists?” I asked.

He laughed, glanced at the woman sitting next to him, and said, “Why the fuck should I pay them. They’re getting a fucking wall in Wynwood!”

It may have been obvious to him, but it was not so obvious to me. The latest building sale in Wynwood broke records. At \$53.5 million, the property sold for \$1,250 per square foot for building and land. This figure is astronomical, especially considering the age of the building, the faulty infrastructure in the neighborhood, and the lack of housing options. But the neighborhood is still hot.

Yes, artists get “exposure” for their work in Wynwood. Yes, their artwork is often a background for modeling photo sessions and the pictures pop up in magazines worldwide. And yes, there are tons of Facebook “likes” and “shares” that expand the views of the street art.

But as several artists have emphasized, “exposure” does not pay the bills, magazines rarely cite the name of the artists, and “likes” don’t get them into galleries.3. In the end, buying a building in Wynwood costs millions. A mural costs nothing.