

Bernie Taupin letting his art flag fly at Art Palm Springs.



Art Palm Springs is expecting more than 14,000 people for its sixth annual event featuring art from international galleries. It's drawing a bigger picture than mere international art.

Art Palm Springs opens Thursday, Feb. 16 at the Palm Springs Convention Center with a ceremony honoring Artist of the Year Lita Albuquerque of Malibu and Art Patron of the Year Donna MacMillan of Indian Wells. It's also showcasing local art events. It will preview the first Desert X biennale at 1 p.m. Saturday and provide a bus tour of Modernism Week the next morning.

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The art fair provides an opportunity to hear select artists — from Albuquerque to Mike Nesmith of The Monkees — discuss their work. It's also spotlighting an artist making international news for his songwriting.

Bernie Taupin is celebrating 50 years of writing with Elton John, the longest collaboration ever by a lyricist with a composer, considering Mick Jagger and Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones have been writing their own words and music for many years. Taupin is being celebrated at Art Palm Springs for his work as a fine artist shown by such galleries as Waterhouse & Dodd in London and New York, and KM Fine Art and Timothy Yarger Fine Art in Los Angeles. The latter is presenting his abstract art in varied media at Art Palm Springs. Taupin, 66, will discuss his evolution as an artist in his only personal appearance at 5 p.m. Friday Feb. 17 in the convention center theater.

He discussed that evolution in an interview with the Desert Sun:

I've read that your mother exposed you to art as a kid, but that you began immersing yourself in abstract art at New York museums in 1970-71. I find the timing of that interesting because that's when you were breaking out with Elton John (accompanying him on tours and recording sessions). What attracted you to those museums?

BERNIE TAUPIN: We were in New York at the tail end of 1970 or early 1971 and New York was not exactly a safe haven. We didn't have a lot of money, so the only places that seemed hospitable and relatively cheap to get into were the museums, like MOMA (the Museum of Modern Art), and galleries. I just became absolutely infatuated to the point where I would start my day by going over to MOMA. I could see the evolution of art that I appreciated going back to the Great Masters and people like Van Gogh and Gauguin, who I absolutely loved. Then you could see the changing patterns of art and how things were rapidly changing all the way up to the 1950s with Warhol and Heron and Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg just blew my mind.

Then (abstract expressionists) like Anselm Kiefer, who was a huge, huge influence on me. Hans Hofmann, who I always cite as the blue touch paper for when I actually started working in the abstract field in the early '90s, when I was able to settle down and get into the kind of things I wanted to do. My early stuff was sort of (like) the true colors Hofmann had. But any artist strives over the years to find his own voice. In music also, we always start by emulating our idols and purloining a bit from here and a bit from there. Then you get frustrated by that because it's not original. In the last couple years, I feel I've found my stride. I discovered more people like Antoni Tàpies while still looking back on people like Rauschenberg.

In your latest collection, "Antiphona," you can see Robert Rauschenberg's influence.

Absolutely. You picked up on that.

What I didn't pick up is what Antiphona means?

I think if you look it up you'll probably find a better meaning than I can give. It's really an appreciation of musical sense. It has a lot of connotations. (The Free Dictionary describes it as a Latin word for the musical response one side of a choir makes to the other in a chant).

I thought it might be a word you made up.

I do tend to make things up. I had a show titled "Anarcheology," a combination of archaeology and anarchy, and I had a show at KM in L.A. called "Somnabulistica." Having come from the word side of things, I like to find things that are interesting and encourage investigation. I defer to Andy Warhol when people asked him what he was trying to say in a piece of art. He'd say, 'Well, what does it say to you?' which is infinitely more interesting, I think, than to have to go into a long convoluted explanation.

I'd like to explore your use of flags in your art. I know you became an American citizen, but, did you always use the American flag to evoke irony or anger, or was there ever a period when you were inspired by the ideals the flag represents.



“Worlds’ Most Wanted”

All of the work I create around the flag is done from an immensely patriotic point of view. I understand wholly the respect people have for the flag, as I do. What people seem to forget, and I think is totally ironic, is that the flag has been battered, burned, desecrated, trampled on, stolen, kidnapped, shot through, cut through and, for some reason, it always comes back. That’s what is so fantastic about the flag, why it is such an iconic symbol of bouncing back, of resilience.

All of these things I’m trying to stress in my flag-related pieces. The flag causes such an emotional reaction in people that I can’t believe it hasn’t been used more. I’ve done so many pieces now with the flag, I’m almost known predominantly for my flag-incorporated works. They seem to be the ones that not only generate the most controversy, but seem to be the most popular.

You don’t find that same sort of symbolism with the Union Jack?

I have no interest in the Union Jack. I’ve lived in this country since 1970. Before that, I did everything I possibly could to get here. I was only ever interested in American history. You can say I was born in the wrong place at the wrong time, but, no. I’m an American citizen. I’m motivated by Americana in general. If you look at all of my pieces, all of my songs, name me anything, other than maybe one or two things, that don’t allude to my Americanism. I would refer to myself as a good, radical American patriot.

What is it about America that attracted you and made you want to become a citizen?

It goes back to my childhood. Every kid born in my era (in England) was obsessed with America. Ask any of my peers. When we were kids, we played cowboys and Indians. We listened to American records. I grew up listening to Johnny Horton, Johnny Cash and Marty Robbins. The first song that made me want to write songs was Marty Robbins’ “El Paso.” There wasn’t any English influence there at all.

I had a conversation with a DJ from Radio Luxembourg recently...

Radio Luxembourg was our absolute Bible. The BBC didn’t play anything adventurous. The first time I heard real hard-core country was on the American Forces (Radio). Radio Luxembourg was the first time I heard Bob Dylan. So, those were absolute cherished memories.

...He was saying English culture was devastated in the 1950s. The draft was still on and no one could think of going into art, so they looked to America for artistic inspiration.

I wouldn't wholly agree with that. I just think it was underground. In the '50s, there were (artists) like Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon. There was a lot of very good jazz in England in the '50s. But younger people didn't really look for it or understand it. It was decidedly a black and white period.

What do you think of this Seismic shift with Donald Trump and Brexit?

I don't think it's my place to comment on that. There's too much to say and I don't think it really plays into what I'm doing right now.



It doesn't inspire your art? I would have thought that "They Placed Her in a Glass Coffin and Awaited Her Re-Awakening" was.

Well, yes. Exactly. But again, I think that's for the viewer to discuss and see from his own point of view. Let's put it like this: We're not making America great by going down the road we're going now. America can be made great again, but it's not going to be made great by this administration.

"They Placed Her In A Glass Coffin and Awaited Her Re-awakening."

I would have thought your piece, "Straight Jacket," had something to do with the changing world.

Absolutely. You can say no more than that. It's busting at the seams. I don't like to get too literal because then it doesn't leave too much for the viewer, or the listener, if you're talking about songs. It's the Andy Warhol thing again: 'What does it mean to you?'



I have to ask a question you've probably been asked many times as a lyricist: Does the title come first or does the art influence the title?

It varies. It is like a song. With songs, I invariably come up with the title first. But with my art work, more often than not, the piece will speak to me and tell me the title. Sometimes it can be radically odd. On occasions, I will sketch out something with a title in mind. Titles are very, very important. I don't think I could ever do what is done so much in abstract art, where the pieces are credited by number.

What did you think of Dylan winning a Nobel Prize for Literature for his songwriting?

Oh, I have no problem with that. I think Leonard Cohen is more literary and from a poetic and novelistic background. But, as far as Dylan is concerned, I didn't think twice about it. Good for him!

The controversy was over giving it to a lyricist. People said, "This isn't literature."

That's personal taste. It's like, who died and made you king that you can be the authority on this and say it's not literature?

The reason I brought it up is because I read that, in the last year or two, you started identifying yourself as a visual artist more than as a lyricist. Is that how you see yourself?

Well, yeah. The simple answer to that is, I don't write songs daily. It's certainly slowed down over the years. I don't even know if Elton and I will ever make another album. We're at the point in our lives where maybe we have one more in us and we'll do it in a couple of years or something like that. But (art) is what I do (almost) every single day.

This is my job. This is what I want to do.



You're celebrating the 50th anniversary of your partnership with Elton. I'd think that would put some pressure on you to get together and write something for an album.

The thing is, we just made an album last year. So, just because it's our 50th anniversary... I'm not going to say we're not going to write anything again. We're writing a couple of songs for a movie right now. So we're still active. But, we don't want to prostitute ourselves and make an album just because it's the 50th.

A song on your last album, "Looking Up," has that line, "Time is wasted looking back." Then, all of a sudden, you're doing a 50th anniversary celebration.

It's definitely something worth celebrating. We're probably the longest-running songwriting team in history. There's nobody else that even comes close outside of Jagger and Richards and they rarely write together anymore. So it's definitely worth celebrating and there are things being done within the framework of that. But it's more about him and me celebrating than anything else.