

## Greg Escalante, Champion of Low Brow Art, Dies at 62

By Neil Genzlinger - September 15, 2017

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In his 30s and several years out of college, where he had studied art and been bored by much of it, Greg Escalante saw a skateboarding magazine and was so bowled over by the artwork on the cover that he spent the rest of his life championing the genre it represented — what came to be known as Lowbrow Art.

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(left) A 1998 cover of Juxtapoz magazine.

As a gallery owner, curator, collector, writer and all-around cheerleader, Mr. Escalante furthered the work of countless artists in that brash, eye-popping genre, notably through [Juxtapoz](#), the art magazine he helped bring into being.

“Greg, you always dove right in, emerged with such exhilaration and found the pearl in the oyster,” Gwynned Vitello, the publisher and president, wrote in a post on the magazine’s website noting Mr. Escalante’s death on Sept. 7.

He was 62 and lived in Huntington Beach, Calif. Mr. Escalante’s brother Joe said the cause was suicide, adding that Greg had struggled for years with depression.

Mr. Escalante would often tell the story of his epiphany — the time he saw that cover of Thrasher magazine in the late 1980s. He had attended California State University at Long Beach to study ceramics but had graduated in 1980 on something of a down note, feeling unimpressed with the stuffiness of much of the art world.

“Back then, you would go to an exhibit and there would be an art show with a bunch of frames with a completely white canvas, and that was some Conceptual minimal art,” he recalled in an online radio interview.



(left) A Perplexity Searching For An Enigma Through The Maze Of An Ambiguity,” an oil painting by Robert Williams, was among the artwork Mr. Escalante helped promote.

The Thrasher cover, painted by the well-known underground cartoonist Robert Williams,

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introduced Mr. Escalante to the vibrant world of out-of-the-mainstream art, filled with raw energy and bold images that reflected California car culture, surfing, tattooing, graffiti, cartooning and more.

“It was the craziest painting I’d ever seen,” he said. “It just looked like if Salvador Dalí had grown up in Southern California, that’s what he’d be painting.”

He added, “I didn’t know they could make art this cool.”

Mr. Escalante became friends with Mr. Williams and others who drew, painted and decorated hot rods in the style. A 1982 book by Mr. Williams, “The Lowbrow Art of Robert Williams,” would give the genre its most common name; Pop Surrealism is another.

Mr. Escalante believed that these works should have been in galleries and museums and on the radar of collectors. In 1992, he and Doug Nason founded the Copro Nason Gallery in Culver City, Calif. (since renamed [CoproGallery](#) and relocated to Santa Monica). In 2015, he opened [Gregorio Escalante Gallery](#) in the Chinatown section of Los Angeles.

The galleries embraced a broad definition of art, and so did Juxtapoz, the magazine that he and several others helped Mr. Williams start in 1994. The magazine, Mr. Escalante once said, emphasized accessible writing, in contrast to Artforum, “where it’s like some Ph.D. in art history is writing it with all these footnotes and is trying to show you how smart they are but could care less about how it would be to read it.”

Gregory Conrad Escalante was born in Los Angeles on April 17, 1955. His father, Conrad, designed and made electric signs. His mother, Jacqueline, was a homemaker.

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He was interested in ceramics even in high school and once had a job at a place called the Pottery Shack in Laguna Beach. People would stop and take pictures of him as he threw pots on the wheel, which left his younger brother Joe awe-struck.



(left) A hyperreal portrait sculpture of Salvador Dalí by Kazuhiro Tsuji was among Mr. Escalante's favorite pieces in his galleries.

“He was like a tourist attraction,” Joe Escalante said. “I thought it was the greatest job in the world, because he was famous. When he quit that job I was devastated.”

Greg Escalante [once described](#) how fate had intervened and steered him from ceramics into the financial markets: He injured his shoulder while skiing, which left him unable to make pottery for several months.

“I got a job selling soccer tickets over the phone, and then later I got another job selling commodities,” he said. “And I could make way more money selling commodities than I could selling ceramics.”

Eventually he wound up with a bond-trading concern. That experience, Mr. Williams said in a telephone interview, would serve Mr. Escalante well in promoting art and artists.

“He had enormous social skills,” Mr. Williams said. “You had to have social skills to make cold calls all the time as a bond salesman. He was always connecting artists and buyers, bringing people together.”

His role as a facilitator was especially on display in the early 1990s, when he

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helped bring about a landmark 1993 exhibition at the [Laguna Art Museum](#), where he was on the board. The show, “Kustom Kulture: Von Dutch, Ed ‘Big Daddy’ Roth, Robert Williams and Others,” helped introduce the works of those artists to the mainstream.

“This show was a cultural milestone and laid the foundation for the Lowbrow Art movement of the ’90s and beyond,” said Larry Reid, who helped Mr. Escalante bring a touring version of the exhibition to Seattle, where Mr. Reid is curator of the [Fantagraphics Bookstore and Gallery](#). “It’s safe to say this exhibition, and quite possibly the entire movement, wouldn’t have happened absent Greg’s tireless enthusiasm.”



(left) An oil portrait of Greg Escalante painted by Jon Swihart in 2014.

Among the artists Mr. Escalante championed was Edgar Leeteg, who was known for his paintings on velvet. That was emblematic of Mr. Escalante’s determination to break down barriers that have seemed to define art narrowly and make it the province of wealthy elites.

“I want to do art shows in a museum that should never be there,” [he once said](#). “It should never happen. You should never have black velvet in a museum.”

The artist Shepard Fairey said by email, “His importance to democratizing art and blurring the lines between subculture and the elite fine art world is significant.”

Although headlines often go to seven-figure purchases made at auctions, Mr.

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Williams noted that the players in such transactions are not really the ones who keep the art world moving; people like Mr. Escalante are.

“It’s not big millionaires,” he said. “It’s kind people who push what they love.”

In addition to his brother, Mr. Escalante’s survivors include his wife, Kristin Sherratt Escalante; their daughter, Isabella; another brother, Thomas; and his sisters, Mariana Williams, Diane Escalante, Terri Escalante and Mary Ann Escalante Nasser.

Mr. Escalante liked to display his personal collection as much as possible — in his home and office, in galleries and in the homes of friends and family members. But he said he eventually had to put some in storage. Then the A&E reality show “Storage Wars” came on the air in 2010, with its shop owners and others — Dave Hester is a regular — who bid on the contents of abandoned storage units.

“I have this nightmare that I’m going to turn that show on and all of a sudden I’m going to see my whole art collection being loaded into Dave Hester’s truck or something,” Mr. Escalante said. “Then run to his auction place and buy it all back.”

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