

ARTICLES

Interactive Art Center Meow Wolf Is Forging a New Business Model for Artists

Meow Wolf has evolved from a ragtag group staging low-budget shows into a multimillion-dollar operation that employs more than 150 people.

Brendan L. Smith July 25, 2017



House of Eternal Return, installation view
(photo by Kate Russell, all images courtesy Meow Wolf)

For many private arts venues, fundraising is a hardscrabble ordeal, an unceasing quest to scrape together enough grants and donations to keep the lights on — which makes Meow Wolf’s recent fundraising success all the more remarkable.

Meow Wolf, a Santa Fe-based artist collective that opened a very popular [permanent art installation](#) in a former bowling alley in 2016, raised [more than \\$1 million](#) in just two days on Wefunder, faster than any other company using the crowdfunding website. More than 725 investors paid at least \$1,000 each to help fund the building of a new manufacturing facility in Santa Fe and the hiring of a full-time team to build new installations as Meow Wolf plans to expand to future locations, most likely in Austin, Denver, Houston, or Las Vegas.

Meow Wolf co-founder and CEO Vince Kadlubek told Hyperallergic that he was surprised by the quick response, especially since there is no way for investors to sell their shares in a privately held company and no guarantee of any profits in the



Meow Wolf (photo by Kate Russell)



House of Eternal Return, installation view
(photo by Lindsey Kennedy)

future.
“We know we have fans, and we have a good profile,” he said.

“It’s a fairly risky proposition for investors, so the fact that so many people were willing to jump in without a promise of a return really spoke volumes. We’re so grateful for the support we have.”

Meow Wolf, which got its name from random words drawn from a hat by collective members, also raised more than \$7 million earlier this year through more conventional investment rounds. It has become an employee-owned company with a revenue-sharing plan for the more than 135 artists who created the vast 20,000-square-foot permanent installation called *House of Eternal Return*, in the process forging a path for a new business model to support artists: a hybrid blend of art and entertainment that sells immersive experiences rather than artwork. The installation has become a major tourist attraction in Santa Fe, seeing more than 400,000 visitors and raking in \$7 million in revenue in its first year. The installation has broad appeal, attracting families and tourists who might never step foot in a gallery or art museum. That success has stirred some controversy in art circles about whether Meow Wolf is creating art or just entertainment — as if there’s some reason visual art shouldn’t be just as entertaining and profitable as film, music, or theater.



House of Eternal Return, installation view
(photo by Lindsey Kennedy)



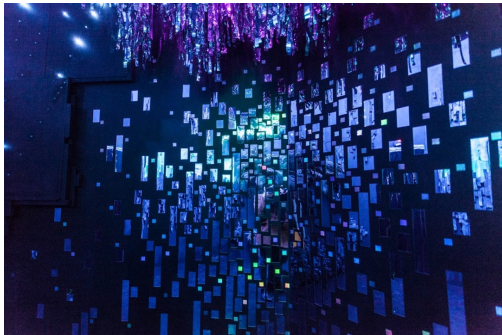
House of Eternal Return, installation view
(photo by Lindsey Kennedy)



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While Hollywood has protected the rights of creatives through royalties, emerging visual artists are often expected to work for free in exchange for “exposure,” and they don’t get royalties when their work is resold in the future at higher values. “We’re building a model that is more like the entertainment model, so artists are able to participate in the success that their creativity brings forth,” Kadlubek said. “We feel like we’ve cracked an egg, and I’m hoping that other artists take advantage of this model.”

I drove to the *House of Eternal Return* in early July, at the tail end of a dusty 700-mile road trip from the scorched earth of Las Vegas to the stunning mountainous landscape of Santa Fe, which was a homecoming of sorts. I lived in “The City Different” for seven years before moving to Washington, D.C., in 2005, and I started making mixed-media artwork there, collecting rusted bedsprings, auto parts, and metal scraps that had been tossed decades earlier into rock-bottomed arroyos in the piñon-studded hills around the city. I used to bowl and sing drunken karaoke in the bar at Silva Lanes before Meow Wolf transformed it into something entirely different and unexpected.



House of Eternal Return, installation view
(photo by Lindsey Kennedy)



House of Eternal Return, installation view
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At the *House of Eternal Return*, I saw the ticket line



House of Eternal Return, installation view
(photo by Lindsey Kennedy)

stretching out the door toward the giant metal sculptures of a wolf and a robot smelling a flower in the parking lot. Inside, the installation opens in a *Scooby Doo*-ish Victorian house, where a vaguely described mystery involving a missing family has unlocked supernatural portals into other worlds. The theme is a very loose construct

that ultimately fails to contain the chaos within the wondrous maze of rooms filled with a bizarre bounty of surprises. A 20-foot-tall furry, horned creature stares down with hollow glowing eyes, a video projection of a falling man can only be glimpsed inside a toilet, and a path winds through a forest of neon glowing trees. I walked into a mastodon skeleton's eerie green rib cage and played its bones like a xylophone. Try doing *that* at MoMA.



House of Eternal Return, installation view
(photo by Lindsey Kennedy)

As an arts writer, I initially started analyzing the experience, but I quickly realized that was a mistake. It's more refreshing to just roll with the weirdness and see what opening the next door brings. *House of Eternal Return* is a creative free-for-all, like falling into a dream or sliding down a rabbit hole. It's a psychedelic trip that winds through narrow openings and up twisting spiral staircases. My two sons, who are five and seven, loved it, unlike some of our art museum forays where they kept yanking me toward the exit. They didn't care if this wild ride was art or entertainment or both — and pretty soon I didn't, either.

Over the past decade, Santa Fe's art scene has sharpened its edges considerably, moving beyond a regional focus on Southwestern art,

Pueblo pottery, and the bland abstract paintings that the calcified galleries on Canyon Road sell to rich tourists. Nine contemporary art galleries now fill the new [Railyard Arts District](#) next to the contemporary art museum [SITE Santa Fe](#). The [first museum](#) in the nation dedicated to encaustic art opened this year with an exhibition focused on climate change. And Meow Wolf has evolved from a ragtag group of artists staging [low-budget shows in rundown buildings](#) into a multimillion-dollar operation that employs more than 150 people, helping artists thrive in a state hammered by the nation's highest unemployment rate. It remains to be seen whether their radically different art-as-entertainment model will succeed outside the Land of Enchantment, but hundreds of investors are betting on it.



House of Eternal Return, installation view
(photo by Lindsey Kennedy)



Christian Ristrow's Robot at Meow Wolf
(photo by Kate Russell)



House of Eternal Return, installation view
(photo by Lindsey Kennedy)

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