

Nathaniel Tetsuro Paolinelli: Downtown

Curated by Daniel Ulibarri



516 ARTS

June 11 – September 3, 2022
Albuquerque, New Mexico



NATHANIEL TETSURO PAOLINELLI

Born 1976, Santa Cruz, California

Nathaniel Tetsuro Paolinelli is an award-winning art director and graphic designer. He received a B.A. in History with minor in Criminology from the University of New Mexico in 2002. His photographs have been exhibited at Black Box Gallery in Portland, Oregon; Leica Fotografie International; and Eckington Gallery in Washington, DC. He received numerous Leica Master Shot Awards and is a member of Diversify Photo, a community of BIPOC and non-western photographers, editors, and visual producers working to break with the predominantly colonial and patriarchal eye through which history and the mass media has seen and recorded the images of our time. His work is in the Permanent Collection of the Albuquerque Museum.

FRONT COVER: *Marilyn*, 2014, photograph • BACK COVER: *Lost Soul*, 2021, photograph
ABOVE: *Self-Portrait*, 2022, photograph



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516 ARTS is a non-collecting contemporary art museum in the center of Downtown Albuquerque that celebrates thought-provoking art in the here and now. Our mission is to connect contemporary artists and diverse audiences. 516 ARTS presents relevant exhibitions and public programs, which feature a mix of local, national and international artists from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

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PORTRAITS OF PLACE

By Daniel Ulibarri, Exhibition Curator

The energy one feels while walking through the area loosely defined as Downtown Albuquerque is as multifaceted as the various cultures, narratives, and communities cultivated there. The area bordered by Marble Avenue to the north, Coal Avenue to the south, and Seventh and Tenth Streets to the west results from longstanding complexities, active authenticity, and ever developing history. Downtown Albuquerque is the state’s urban center and the idiosyncratic heart of the Land of Enchantment. This particular place is impossible to replicate or stage. It is best depicted or portrayed by someone who has experienced life within its perimeters.

What goes on in the streets of Downtown is a primary subject in the work of Nathaniel Tetsuro Paolinelli, a documentary street photographer whose work actively rejects pigeonholing or compartmentalizing, a value often shared by the subjects he photographs. A walk through Downtown can be uncomfortable for some, but it is fertile ground for Paolinelli’s creative process. Never leaving home without his Leica-Q2, he has developed a reputation as one of the most consistently active photographers working in Albuquerque today. His prolific work depicting Albuquerque and New Mexico is growing in acclaim nationally.

The authenticity of Paolinelli’s work documenting the realities and diversities of life in New Mexico is made possible by him having grown up in the area. He has lived within three miles of Downtown Albuquerque since he was nine months old. A graduate of Freedom High, he grew up immersed in the Duke City culture, which shaped his photographic eye. While Downtown presents many systemic challenges to residents and visitors, it is a place of comfort and inspiration for Paolinelli.



As a photographer, the success of his practice centers around his ability to develop relationships with his subjects before taking photographs of them. There is a tangible rapport that exists between the photographer and the subject and a magnetic honesty that permeates the images. Having always been drawn to subjects with character, Paolinelli’s first priority is to take part in his surroundings and in his words, capture “an intimate view into what’s happening here, as opposed to being an outsider taking snapshots.” He photographs every person as they are and he captures every scene as an active participant. His images are modern codices of the spirit of Downtown Albuquerque for future generations to discover.



This selection of photographs displays many of the pillars of Duke City values and uniquely New Mexican culture. *Selfie* portrays a local man proudly showcasing his lowrider vehicle in reverence during an annual cruise in memory of a community member who went by Sparky. Selfie is an empowering image that shows pride in New Mexico’s highly creative lowrider car culture. Holding up a cell phone with a phone case showing a photo of a young family member is a perfect representation of the subject’s values. The driver stands on his throne in motion, a symbol of the unique artistry, community, culture, and family of which they are a part. Lowriders, and the people who create and drive them, embody the heart and spirit of New Mexico.

Other images, like *Our Lady of Guadalupe* and *6*, show the physical representation of Albuquerque’s individuality in the form of body modifications. Faith, attitude, culture, and technology converge in tattoo artistry. Documentary photographs of tattoo art increase the medium’s longevity beyond the subject’s lifetime. The stories and spirit of people like Sparky who bring Downtown alive, are celebrated and preserved through Paolinelli’s work.

While his work has launched in the digital realm, “Tetsuro,” as Paolinelli is known on social media, has created images that have cemented their place in Albuquerque’s history by their inclusion in the permanent collection of the Albuquerque Museum. Paolinelli’s work puts a microscope, or rather a prime lens, on the humanity of everyone he photographs. The palpable love and acceptance he has for his subjects inspires a call to ponder the emotion depicted in the images. To the artist, that intimacy created by being an active participant in his environment is what gives his images their vitality. His use of a fixed focal length forces him to be within dialog distance with his subjects, emphasizing a sense of vulnerability. The story of each person, which is often found written across their very body in scars and ink, is captured through a combination of an implicit trust between artist and subject and a skillful eye.

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The body of Paolinelli’s work in this exhibition represents both the artist’s personal journey and the beauty that thrives Downtown under the shroud of negative headlines. There is spirit growing through and out of every alley and crack in the pavement. At any given moment, Downtown is bursting with personality; from the bustling nightlife, art walks, and streets serving as a conveyor belt for lowriders. Paolinelli brings these larger-than-life personalities down to earth. His focus on the humanity and soul behind face tattoos, the families and values that raised these personalities, and the wheels that propel them up, project a picture of what it means to be from “Burque,” and why there is no place many of us would rather be.



LEFT: *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 2021, photograph • MIDDLE: *Selfie*, 2021, photograph • ABOVE: *6*, 2022, photograph

Daniel Ulibarri, Digital Engagement Coordinator at 516 ARTS, is a professional photographer, educator, and emerging curator. He is a graduate of New Mexico Highlands University, class of 2021 with B.A. degrees in both English and Media Arts. This exhibition is part of 516 ARTS’ effort to feature the work of young curators and accomplished artists in our community who have not been shown locally.