



WHERE AMARILLO HANGS OUT

Photograph by Efren Lopez/Route66Images

While small towns are perhaps more romanticized along Route 66, the larger urban areas are also much loved, each known for their own unique offerings. Springfield, Illinois, is home to the always busy Cozy Dog eatery, and St. Louis is of course the proud owner of the Gateway Arch. Tulsa receives visitors to the Golden Driller every day, and Oklahoma City is home to the Historic Stockyard and the Gold Dome. But down in Amarillo, the largest of the Texan towns that Route 66 runs through, they are famous for the undeniably quirky Cadillac Ranch and for the Big Texan's 72-ounce steak eating challenge. But there is a destination that calls Amarillo home that is not quite as loud but is no less proud: the Historic District on Route 66, and there is no one who has demonstrated their love and dedication to celebrating this unexpected location in Amarillo more than one man with a big smile.

Located along the quaint Sixth Avenue alignment of the famous highway, smack dab in the Historic District, there are shops, galleries, and eateries not to be missed. But there, in an 1,100-square-foot building perched on what was once just a vacant lot during the Great Depression, a unique gallery offers not only a wide selection of art, but also an array of handmade — and unusual — jewelry pieces. The bright, turquoise-painted store front amid a low-slung row of small brick commercial buildings might be the first thing to catch one's eye, followed by the laid-back Australian Shepherd draped across the threshold of the front door. But the visitor's interest is solidified once they're greeted by the gallery's friendly and knowledgeable owner, Bob "Croc" Lile.

Lile Art Gallery features the work of not only local artists, but also that of others from states as far away as California. There are even prints by the late Bob Waldmire, who inspired the character Fillmore in the Pixar film, *Cars*. But among the work of these talented individuals, visitors also find art created by the proprietor of the gallery himself, "Croc" Lile. Not only has Croc run the place for the past 14 years — ten and a half of those in the current location — he is also a recognized artist in his own right, known for his painted mosaics. However, that's not what generally brings visitors flocking to his gallery — but more on that in a minute.

Croc was a late bloomer when finding his artistic voice as an abstract expressionist. He hadn't so much as touched a paintbrush until he was 28. However, in 1967 he met George "Dord" Fitz, a university-trained artist and teacher who founded the Dord Fritz School of Art in Amarillo in 1953. "He taught me art for 21 years, until he passed away," said Croc. "He told me, 'You have a penchant for the creative. You need to claim your creative heritage. Everyone does.' Most people go to their grave with their song still in them." Croc traveled with Fitz to Greece, Egypt, and Italy. Together, they led tours in Flagstaff and Santa Fe with a class of 40 people, spending a week painting with a well-known artist. Every year throughout the '70s and '80s, the two men traveled to New York City to visit artists and museums.

In the late '80s, Croc acquired his nickname while volunteering as a scout master for the Boy Scouts. From December 30, 1987, to January 7, 1988, he accompanied 36 young men to the 16th

World Scout Jamboree in Australia. On the trip, he met a boy named Charles who owned a copy of the children's book, *Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile*. "I [had] never heard of it, but he started calling me Crocodile Lile. So as a lark, I sent postcards home and signed them 'Crocodile' Lile," Croc said. "I owned a Ford dealership, and the lady who did my radio ads said it was a natural. So, we did spots on the radio, and I've been Crocodile Lile ever since. Most people on Route 66 call me Croc."

Besides his unforgettable nickname, Croc's canine companions are also a draw that pulls people in off the street. Lady Lile is a beautiful, gentle Australian Shepherd — a natural as a greeter for the gallery for ten-and-a-half of her 14 years. The second eldest is Croc's "guard dog," Zeek, a two-year-old rescue Border Collie mix. The newest addition is Trooper, a one-year-old 20-pound mix. What's he a combination of? Nobody knows, but he's training to be a greeter, too. Whether Croc is working in his office or assisting patrons of the gallery, the trio of dogs is always present and gives the place a homey and playful atmosphere.

But the gallery's true star is Croc's Cadilite jewelry. In 2014, Croc happened upon an artist online who made Fordite jewelry from the remains of old car paint in the auto plants of Detroit. Inspired by the polished lacquer paint designs, Croc took some paint chips that he acquired from the graffiti at Cadillac Ranch, as is the custom with visitors at the attraction, and he got to work. This wasn't the first time he made art out of the blocks of paint; he used them in the 26 mosaics that he created, but this was a different process. "It took me three months to work on my first piece because I'm not a jeweler and I had no idea what I was doing," he said. "I've gotten better at it now, but I quit about 15 times. My wife encouraged me to keep going, and that was eight years ago." He initially used a Grinnell tool and wet sanding to get the result that he wanted, but he switched to a flat-top lapidary machine with a diamond disc with water to keep it cool. The method change resulted in hundreds of hours saved to get the desired designs that are all one-of-a-kind and idiosyncratic in style. The pieces are set in sterling silver bracelets, necklaces, bolo ties, and other items.

The Cadilite jewelry has given Lile Art Gallery a constant stream of new customers from a seemingly endless material supply. He's sold pieces worldwide, including to customers from Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and China, thanks to his website and Facebook page. As of 2022, he's sold jewelry to customers in every state of the U.S. Seven days a week, eight hours a day, Croc is at his shop, dividing his time at the gallery between working on new pieces of jewelry, often multiple at once, and talking to customers who just may have been lured in by Lady "saying hello" at the door.

"I've been real fortunate to have an art gallery in Amarillo for 14 years, to be on 66, and to be involved with all the people I know," Croc said. "Some wonderful people are making a living on Route 66, and I'm lucky to know most of them."

So, the next time you're in Amarillo, after you've sprayed some vintage vehicles and filled up on the wonderful adventure that the Big Texan offers, head on down to Sixth Avenue and pay a visit to the Lile Art Gallery. He'll be glad you came, and so will you.