

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

And the Beat Goes on: Predator Cycling and the Abbot Kinney Cultural Scene

By Tamar Sinanian and Taleen Tertzakian



A red wooden picket fence greets passers-by on Venice Beach's famous Abbot Kinney Boulevard, inviting them to enter the casual and friendly atmosphere of the Predator Cycling bicycle showroom. Just beyond the fence is a courtyard, speckled with red tables with white umbrellas, where Angelenos, including both culture and bike enthusiasts, gather throughout the week for seminars, film viewings, art exhibits, drinks, music, and just to hang out.

Predator Cycling, "Predator" for short, established by 23 year old Aram Goganian, exudes the community-oriented character of the street it adorns. Much as on a typical European street, store owners and patrons of Abbot Kinney intermingle each day at various cafes and bars, and throughout the month at various "meet and greet" events organized by the community.

One such event is First Fridays, which takes place on the first Friday of each month during the summer months and has recently been extended to the first Friday of every month. During these evening events, participating businesses in the community open their doors to the public, offering drinks and music in a casual party-like atmosphere. A glass of wine in hand, passers-by hop from business to business, meeting and greeting.

And Predator cycling is at the center of all the activity, helping sponsor the event and always attracting a sizable crowd of its own.

Abbot Kinney Boulevard, which is estimated to bring in more than 80% of Venice's revenue, is composed of a variety of small, unique businesses that make every effort to stand out. This strength of identity and character stems from a rich, and somewhat sordid, past. Mr. Abbot Kinney, the wealthy tobacco mogul after whom the street is named, set out in the 1890s to create a "Venice of America". He sought to turn the land south of Ocean Park through the Del Rey peninsula into a resort town reminiscent of Venice, Italy by embellishing it with canals, gondola rides, amusement piers, and various other entertainments.

But a number of set-backs over the next few decades jeopardized Mr. Kinney's plans. In the 1920s, the city of Los Angeles annexed Venice and sought to rid the town of its honky-tonk atmosphere. By 1930, oil was discovered on the peninsula, leading to pollution of the residential and beach areas. The street and pier were closed for part of the day during the mid-1940's, due to government-imposed curfews during the Second World War.

By the 1950s, Venice was in a state of decay and a far cry from Mr. Kinney's vision. However, in the 1960s, the "Beats," a group of American writers who were known for their rejection of mainstream American values, their creativity and their non-conformist perspective, moved into the Venice area. They brought with them their Bohemian lifestyle, much of it revolving around art and poetry and meetings in coffee houses. It is precisely this bohemian and artsy energy that helped revamp Venice and attracted Aram to set up shop on Abbot Kinney Blvd, serving the interests of its cultural as well as cycling aficionados.



A native of nearby Santa Monica, Aram's interest in bikes started early. He began racing bikes in local and state racing tournaments at the age of twelve. Fed up with what he describes as "inefficient" bikes available in the market, he started designing his own racing bikes. According to Aram, "bikes weren't being built by bike designers, but by marketing departments, as bike companies paid more attention to colors and aesthetics than to design and ride. They were not built by racers for racers. Rather, they were built for looks and sales." By 2000, Aram decided to take matters into his own hands and launched Predator Cycling, working from home. He reengineered bikes to be more efficient, by collaborating with top designers around the world, who shared their research with him. He raced bikes he designed and started beating people that he wasn't supposed to beat and winning races he wasn't supposed to win.

Aram attributes his wins to the highly personalized fit of Predator bikes. According to Aram, Predator is one of the few companies that conduct in-house analysis and testing of all bikes, backing each model with its own particular research and data. Although Predator has made primarily professional racing bikes for the first eight years of its existence, the company has more recently begun building bikes for cycling enthusiasts – people who ride for the pleasure of it, many residents of Abbott Kinney and the communities surrounding it.

At first, Aram tried to get bike shops to carry Predator bikes but received rejection after rejection, because Predator did not have the name recognition the bike shops were looking for. Because primarily professional cyclists rode Predator bikes, sponsors' names, not the Predator brand, would appear on the frames. In addition, the Predator "fit process," the process cyclists would go through to get fitted for a bike, was too difficult and time-consuming for the stores to take on. According to Aram, it takes between eight months and a year to train a bike shop employee to fit someone for a bike, and "bike shops didn't care enough about the fit to meet the standard Predator wanted to meet".

By 2008, Aram had decided Predator Cycling needed a home of its own. He chose Venice because he felt that Predator would fit right into the counter-culture community of small, one-of-a-kind businesses. It turns out that Venice is also mapped out perfectly for local "rides" (or cycling routes) in Los Angeles, which made the location all the more appealing. Since the grand opening of the showroom in March 2008, Aram has not only embraced the Abbot Kinney community but has contributed to its cultural scene.

Predator now manufactures a cruiser-like bike called "The Abbot", named in honor of the street. "The Abbot" is a hand-built hybrid constructed entirely of California-made parts and is built according to the same standard as all the other bikes Predator manufactures. But it has a special feature that makes it a particularly good fit for its surroundings. Aram describes "The Abbot" as a "café racer", carrying its rider effortlessly from one local café to another. It has proven to be the preferred mode of transportation for locals traveling up and down the boulevard, not to mention a fitting image for the seamless blending of culture and everyday life in Abbot Kinney.



In addition to running his bicycle showroom, therefore, Aram enjoys partaking in First Fridays each month, since he believes that art and community are an inextricable part of Predator's cycling and business culture and a crucial component of life in the Abbot Kinney district. Aram collaborated with the authors for Predator's inaugural First Friday in March 2008. The evening featured the work of Martiros Adalyan., The event proved a success, attracting not only Abbot Kinney regulars but people from the surrounding communities, including a large contingent from the Armenian community.

Martiros' gothic canvases carpeted the walls of the courtyard, as a deejay performed in the background while attendees sipped wine. The energy and interest at the Predator open house convinced Aram and the authors to collaborate on future First Fridays, which they did during the summer months of June and August. The June exhibit featured the art work of Greg Beylerian, Cynthia Kossayan, and Sophia Gasparian. In August, a collaboration with Black Maria Gallery brought to the event a diverse array of art from its own gallery. Predator and the authors are now in the process of planning the next First Fridays art event, slated for the beginning of next year. The aim is to help keep the vision of Mr. Kinney alive and the beat of Abbot Kinney Boulevard going.

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