



DAYTRIPPER

## Dafen Oil Painting Village

A woman's shouts and gunfire echo from an alleyway in Dafen Oil Painting Village. It's the third time I've visited, but every visit presents unique eccentricities. I decide to find out what is going on.

I pass small studios about the size of walk-in closets with paintings in various states of completion as I make my way towards the screams.

They lead me to a knee-tall speaker hooked up to a computer playing a war drama. A painter is watching it as he finishes a portrait of a staid looking man in military regalia. Hung throughout the painter's studio are images of Chinese World War II generals. That is his specialty, he says.

And that's basically what Dafen is; the studios in the urban village each have a niche and turn out thousands of pieces of artwork on one motif. Need 300 hand-painted copies of Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers'? No problem. Twenty tie-dye colored elephants? It'll take a day.

I pass an alleyway reeking of lacquer where three shirtless men are haggling over frame prices, before finding a studio that has paintings hung from floor to ceiling of lone branches garnished with a leaf or two. If you had a thing for twigs and a 100-room hotel, Dafen is likely where you would get the artwork.

In 2006, the suburban enclave shipped USD120 million worth of art, painted by thousands of artists, but the 2008 housing crisis in the US hit the area hard, with the deputy head of the Art Industry of Dafen de-

scribing business as 'frozen' at the time. With fewer new walls to cover, demand for paintings dropped across the Pacific.

By 2010 Dafen was still producing 60 percent of the world's oil paintings, partly thanks to Chinese consumers picking up the slack – the faux Van Goghs my landlord favors attest to this.

Located in Buji, Longgang, firmly outside of Shenzhen's CBD, Dafen is not a tourist attraction in the regular sense – although it does have a rather uninspired museum. The reason TripAdvisor rates it the number three thing to do in Shenzhen is the chance to see the industrialization of art.

It's worth spending half a day wandering the area's narrow streets where children play beneath portraits of people ranging from Marilyn Monroe to Osama Bin Laden, but ask before you snap pictures.

Some artists have signs forbidding photography, others are fine with you taking pictures as long as it's obvious you aren't trying to reproduce their work. 'Even the copiers don't want to be copied,' I think, as my camera's battery goes dead.

A man tracing kittens helps me out.

He says I can charge up in his darkened studio. I plug in the camera's battery and watch him. He is using a projector to superimpose the image of a kitten onto a canvas. He traces the outline of the feline before laying the canvas down and hanging up a new one. He traces the cat again. New canvas, same cat. Again and again and again. The next day he will paint based on the lines.



It's depressing to watch a talented artist just copy someone else's work.

He grips the canvases in one hand and turns on the lights. Most of the paintings in the studio are kittens looking at insects. One is a child with a gun.

The boy is wearing a PLA uniform and has the weapon pointed directly at the viewer; toy soldiers are in front of the boy and missiles chase stealth bombers in the background. 'Yeah, that one,' he says. 'That one is an original.' **STG**

### How to Get There

Take the Longgang Line on the Shenzhen Metro to the Dafen stop. Walk along Longgang Dadao until you reach Dafen Oil Painting Village. One of the main entrances is marked by a statue of a large hand holding a paintbrush.

> Daytripper is a monthly column that aims to help people get the most out of their PRD experience by proposing fun excursions that can be made in a single day to explore the local culture and nature of the region.