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TOP STORY

'And the Louie goes to': Adam Neely named 2025 LBAA Artist of the Year; Jean Stern honored with lifetime achievement at annual Art Star Awards

By Clara Beard | LB Indy
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The Laguna Beach Arts Alliance (LBAA) presented local jewelry designer and gemologist Adam Neely with a coveted “Louie” award Wednesday evening for his outstanding contributions to the Laguna Beach artist community during its 17th Annual Art Star Awards. The annual event honors the artists, organizations and patrons who shape Laguna Beach’s vibrant arts scene.



Adam Neely accepts his "Louis" award as 2025 Laguna Beach Art Alliance Artist of the Year.

Clara Beard/LB Indy

Neely's work was featured in the Laguna Art Museum's first-ever decorative art show, and his Modern Alchemy exhibition last summer drew a record-breaking 12,680 visitors. Gallery Magazine named him one of 22 trailblazing artists in 2024, and he has received numerous awards from Town and Country and the American Gems Trade Association for his innovative work.

"Twenty years ago, I dreamed of coming to Laguna Beach and joining this amazing art colony, and I did with a great leap of faith," Neely said. "I opened my first gallery on PCH in North Laguna gallery row at 21 years old. Here we are, 20 years later. I joined the Festival of Arts and exhibited proudly for 12 years and felt like I was becoming part of the Laguna art community."

Neely told attendees he was honored to be featured as the first decorative art exhibitor at the Laguna Art Museum, and gave a special thank you to the LAM's team and board of trustees.

"I'd like to raise a toast to the fellow nominees, the Laguna Beach Art Alliance, and to the continued celebration of the excellence of art together in Laguna Beach," said Neely.

Winners received the prestigious Louie Award, sculpted by renowned Laguna Beach artist Louis Longi.

Other award categories included Best Arts Program, which was won by Laguna Art Museum's Creative Foundations K-12 Education Program, and the Arts Patron of the Year award, given to Wayne and Faye Baglin. The Laguna College of Art & Design for Group Y received the award for Outstanding Arts Collaboration.

Additionally, LBAA presented a Lifetime Achievement Award to art historian Jean Stern for his extraordinary impact on California Impressionism and Laguna Beach's cultural legacy. Stern was unfortunately absent from the proceedings due to a health matter, but left a message for the attendees.

"I am touched and honored to be presented this prestigious award," he wrote in a message read by a Laguna Art Museum staff member. "I want to especially thank the Laguna Art Museum for nominating me for this award and for affording me a second act. I first visited Laguna Beach in 1962 and was gratified to see so many art galleries. I visited again in 1971 to research California art for a term project as a graduate student at UCLA. Laguna Beach has always been a thriving art community since the early 1900s. I am deeply sorry that my wife Linda and I could not attend this in person, as I am writing this from my hospital bed. Most of all, I am grateful and reassured by the LBAA's dynamic and active organization."

Before the awards show, guests were welcomed to a KXFM 104.7 red carpet, where nominees and attendees were interviewed. Participants enjoyed performances by the Laguna Community JaZz Band, live caricatures by David Fleischmann, airbrush body art by Star Shields and various demonstrations by Laguna College of Art & Design students.

The evening's emcee was the witty and entertaining Chris Quilter, a longtime arts supporter known for his work with No Square Theatre and contributions to the local community, including his pivotal role in creating the Susi Q Senior Center, named in honor of his mother.

"I was honored to be asked to emcee the show, and I was humbled by the thought of how many people must have declined the opportunity," said Quilter, also a writer for No Square Theatre's Lagunatics. "In all seriousness, Laguna Beach is a small town with a big artistic heart, and it's a privilege to celebrate the people who make this community such a special place for the arts."