

This Cross-Border Exhibit Attracted Variety Of Patrons

Though Insite94's Formal Exhibit Has Closed, Some Permanent Pieces Remain

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TIJUANA — On a gray, rainy Saturday, art lovers and the merely curious trudged to the beach by the U.S.-Mexico border to peer at three vessels patched together from junk metal sitting on the wet sand.

In the near distance, a steel fence separating the two countries cuts into the restless Pacific Ocean.

"It's a ship without rudders. It conveys the idea of crossing but it's impossible at the same time," said Joe Conlon, who was visiting Baja California from Chicago.

"It shows the futility of the situation," said his friend, William Cordero, also from Chicago, looking first at the impotent vessels made of wire mesh, then the wall.

The pair and their friends from San Diego stumbled upon inSITE94, a recent binational art exhibition here and in San Diego that required patrons to crisscross the border, visiting such far-flung locales as beaches, public parks, a train depot and even some art galleries.

It involved 38 art institutions on both sides of the border, more than 100 artists, most from the United States and Mexico, displaying works at 37 locations. A few of the installations will be permanent.

"It invites you to travel a very interesting map of the region with cultural stops along the way," said Michael Krichman, president of Installation Gallery in San Diego, which coordinated the project.

Organizers wanted to demonstrate the cohesiveness of the San Diego-Tijuana region by taking people to different locations, Krichman said.

The exhibition included such varying works as icons of a woman giving birth lined up on the border wall in Tijuana's Colonia Libertad, and a giant-sized table and chairs in San Diego's train station.

Although some works bore political themes, it was not the point of inSITE94, Krichman said.

"This is not a border show and it is not an exhibition about the U.S.-Mexico border," he said recently. "A number of pieces naturally engage the border in one way or another and a number of pieces are quite political."

"The best work is political but not overtly so. And clearly the best political work in the show is by artists from Mexico City who are working in Mexico with some knowledge of the situation but they see it from afar."

Mexico City artist Helen Escobedo, who created the rickety steel boats, fits that category.

"It's a very beautiful beach and it has a great hurt in it, a scar. The wall goes crashing to the sea," Escobedo said during a recent visit to San Diego.

"Thinking about the sea, I thought about boats, crossings, impossible craft because they're made from steel mesh, they're transparent they don't float, but they have hope."

Escobedo added a dash of humor by using catapults on the boats, or coconut slings, aimed to the north. The idea sprang from a phrase in Spanish, "dar de cocos," which means rapping children on the head with knuckles when they're naughty.

"We'll put coconuts in the slings because they aren't being nice to us," Escobedo said. "It's a very gentle bit of black humor in a rather hopeless situation."

A few yards away, next to a whitewashed lighthouse, the border fence is made of chain link. A van was parked on either side with public address systems on their roofs. People were able climb up to the microphones and say whatever they wanted to the people on the other side.

"The poet Robert Frost said, 'Good fences make good neighbors, but bad fences don't make good neighbors,' " an unidentified man said in English from the Tijuana van.

"Viva Mexico, Viva Los Estados Unidos," said Shirley Wright, of San Diego, speaking from the Tijuana side. "Let's be friends forever."

On the American side, two U.S. Border Patrol agents and a ranger were stationed at the state park where the exhibit was located, but they appeared uninterested in the proceedings.

Said Escobedo: "If we don't all in some way hold hands, there won't be anyplace to go."