

ART

The Great Balboa Park Landfill Exposition of 1997

AS YOU TURN OFF Pershing Drive into the region of Balboa Park known as the Arizona Landfill, you'll see some equipment storage units sitting amidst the sagebrush. In this scruffy, isolated place, a few dog-walkers and joggers wend their way along the mesa, and the mounted police sometimes blare loud music and sirens to train their horses not to react to city noises. At night, gay men rendezvous in the canyon below.

The land here has been abused, and it's still suffering quietly. This 80 acres of the park served as a dump, beginning in 1915 with construction waste from the Panama-California Exposition, until 1971, when it was finally retired from service as a household dump site. Now it's capped with layers of soil and mulch, but the landfill gas resulting from decomposition of organic matter still has to be drained off through an underground pipe system. Which explains the environmental services men tooling around the site in their trucks, monitoring the flare stations.

Into this sparse terrain comes Cindy Zimmerman, agent of transformation. The

matriarch behind the Fern Street Circus and a well-regarded artist who specializes in community involvement, Zimmerman was selected by the city's Public Arts Committee to spearhead the regeneration and beautification of the area. The Great Balboa Park Landfill Exposition of 1997, as Zimmerman has christened the project, culminates October 25 and 26 with a community celebration. Meanwhile, everyone is invited to a hands-on workshop October 11 and 12 to help create an earth-and-straw labyrinth, or spiral path, on the site. The project is part of inSITE 97's collaborative effort between the U.S. and Mexico to create large-scale art in public places while involving and educating the community.

Zimmerman began spending time on "her" land three years ago, when she was first invited to compete for the project. "I had been over here before," she says, "but I didn't quite realize just how undisturbed it is, how you can see jack rabbits and foxes, and hawks circling overhead." She says she took naps on the land, to let the site speak to her. And what was it saying? "It kind of has indigestion," she relates. "It's an unhappy piece of land."

To remedy that situation, Zimmerman is

working with various city departments to help restore native plants to the region and rehabilitate the trails, but her primary function is to create whimsical and artistic structures like the toaster-shaped information icon and the adobe seating area that resembles a giant hot plate. "The kitchen is something I'm thinking about a lot," she explains, "due to the trash that's underneath here."

A sturdy figure in overalls and boots, with a tie-dye scarf knotted around her neck, Zimmerman has embraced this land the way a mother would a scrawny, neglected child. Raised in Oklahoma, where her grandfather had a farm, she has always loved outdoor work. She is friendly with the park workers, and they respond by doing favors for her, such as transporting the heaps of relocated earth she'll use for her adobe structures.

Zimmerman engaged a feng shui (Chinese geomancy) expert to help her select the sites for her installations, which are meant to connect people to the land and its wildlife. The spiral tower, for instance, is also a rabbit warren and hawk perch, and the meditative labyrinth is a device used since ancient times to help people "compost" their worries and become more centered. A calendar mural in the shape of a diamond-back rattler, sacred to the Kumeyaay people who once inhabited the area, is also meant to honor the land.

Women are particularly encouraged to come out and help with the creations. "I'm looking for women who are in touch with their inner Amazon," Zimmerman laughs. "Women like this kind of construction. It's kind of like weaving, the way you use the strings on the straw bales. And after you learn the basics, your own mind tells you what to do next."

The artist's ultimate desire is to reclaim the site for the people of San Diego, perhaps turning it into a day camp for underprivileged children. "I want to make people recognize that this land is part of Balboa Park; it's not no man's land," says



Jimmy Flieger