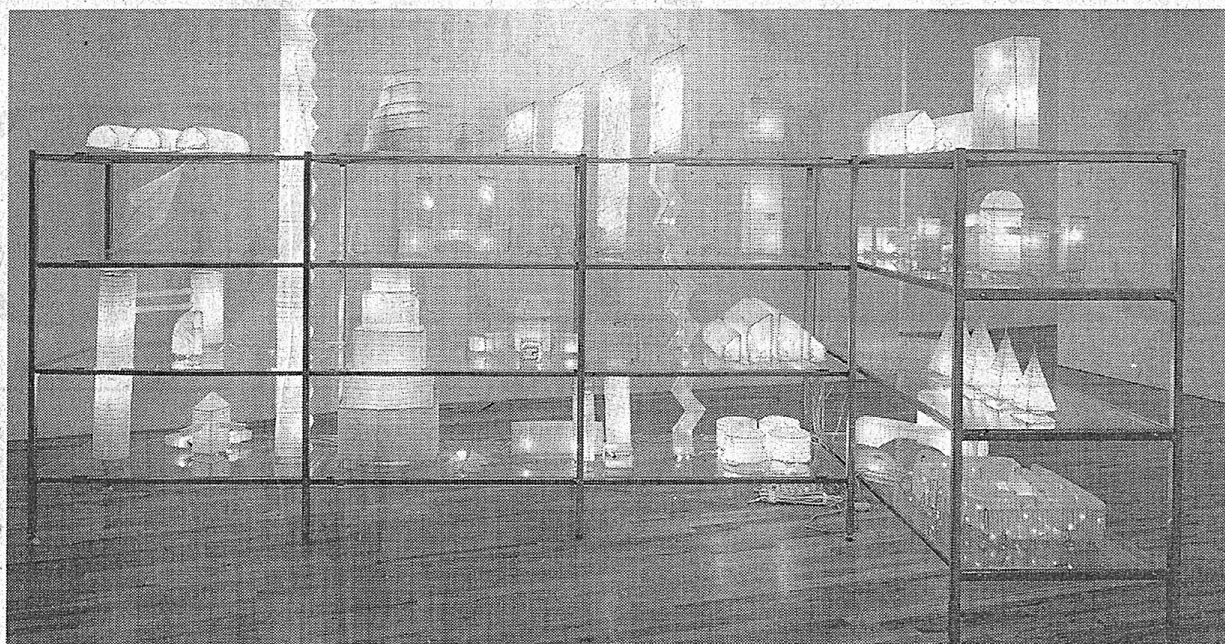


DENIS POROY Associated Press

HIGH-FLYING ART

Daredevil Dave "Human Cannonball" Smith flies from Tijuana, Mexico, toward a safety net on the U.S. side of the border Saturday. The art project, "One Flew Over the Void" by Venezuelan artist Javier Tellez, was among exhibitions and activities marking the opening weekend of the border-straddling showcase in *Site_05*.



CARLOS GARAICOA

FRAGILE NATURE: Carlos Garaicoa's "You Can Build Your Own City at Your Own Risk."

ART REVIEW

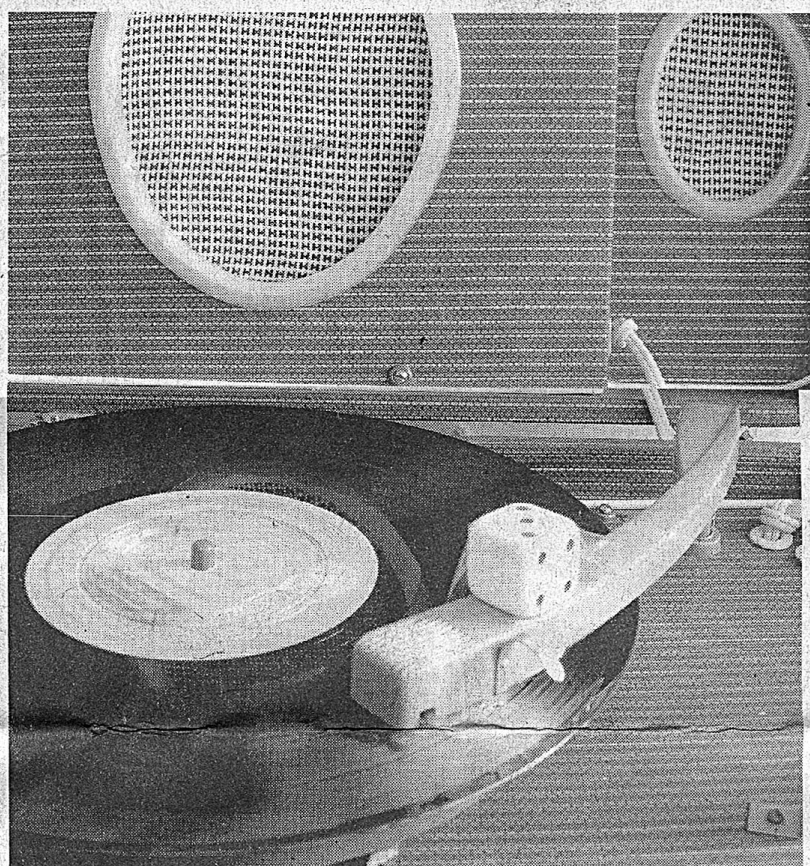
Turning artwork into border issue

By DAVID PAGEL
Special to The Times

SAN DIEGO — The title "Farsites: Urban Crisis and Domestic Symptoms in Recent Contemporary Art" sounds as if it belongs atop a government study or a doctoral dissertation — not outside the entrances to a two-part exhibition of international art. But you don't need to be an expert to see that most of the works installed for this show at the San Diego Museum of Art and the Centro Cultural Tijuana are made from materials plucked straight from the street, often right from the dumpster.

Nearly all of the sculptures are constructed from junk. Many resemble the contents of the shopping carts that homeless people push.

Using rough twine and bits of string, Damián Ortega has lashed together mismatched pieces of thrift-store furniture to create gravity-defying stacks balanced like circus acrobats. José Dávila has simply stacked cardboard boxes to the ceiling, forming a pair of pillars incapable of supporting much more



CAO GUIMARÃES

AN ODE TO VINYL: "Gambiarra 2 (vitrola)" by Cao Guimarães is included in the binational "Farsites" exhibit.

than their own weight.

Franklin Cassaro has taped and glued together newspaper pages to make a giant inflated pillow, which leaks constantly. And Doris Salcedo has filled an armoire and a dresser with concrete, fusing them into the shape of a fallen cross that evokes a sinking sense of deadly finality.

Other sculptures recall the patchwork shelters homeless folks assemble at nightfall, or the shanties families live in on the outskirts of many cities. Pedro Cabrita Reis has built three plywood storage lockers, filling their shelves with old wool blankets and secondhand water jugs. Gregor Scheider's box-shaped sculpture made of scrap lumber resembles a homemade shipping crate that has been converted into a home.

The exhibition's selection of photographs, which outnumber everything else by 2 to 1, features similar subjects: dreary city streets, past-their-prime urban developments and crumbling industrial ruins.

Shuttered buildings, derelict factories, bricked-up windows and razor-wire-topped walls appear repeatedly. Made by Rubens Mano, Gabriele Basilico, Armando Andrade Tudela, Kendall Geers, Armin Linke, Rochelle Costi, Sean Snyder, Dean Sameshima, Carlos Garaicoa, Jonathan Hernández and others, they form something of a school — an international style that could be called point-and-shoot Realism. Opposed to the niceties of fine printing and the rigors of careful composition, these unsophisticated images would look just as good as JPEGs.

Geraldine Lanteri's formulaic pictures of closed businesses, installed in small clusters in each of the galleries, are among the most naive. Businesses close for all sorts of reasons, but these mute images of boarded-up storefronts fail to shed light on any of them.

In nearly all the photographs, as with the sculptures, aesthetic pleasure is suppressed in favor of Realism — or at least the mannerist trappings of sociological analysis. As a group, the prints preserve the style of activist art without its content or commitment to real-world consequences.

After a while, you begin to think there's nothing in the exhibition that isn't outside on the streets for you to discover for yourself. That's part of the point.

Organized by guest curator Adriano Pedrosa, "Farsites" is the centerpiece of inSite 05, the fifth installment of a wide-ranging series of cultural events that has taken place in San Diego and Tijuana every few years since 1992. Along with the 52-artist exhibition, the '05 edition features two elaborate information booths; 10 commissioned projects installed in public

'Farsites'

Where: San Diego Museum of Art, Balboa Park, San Diego, and Centro Cultural Tijuana, Paseo de los Héroes y Mina, Zona Rio, Tijuana

Ends: Nov. 13

Contact: (619) 230-0005 (San Diego), (664) 684-0095 (Tijuana) or www.insite05.org

places in La Jolla, San Diego and Tijuana; and about 25 events scheduled through mid-November, including lectures, workshops, panels and films, some accompanied by cocktails and others available only online or via TV or radio.

At its best, this binational extravaganza celebrates the nitty-gritty intimacy of travel — of being in a strange place, among unfamiliar customs, with nothing but your wits and goodwill to get through a day, week or month of changing perceptions and unexpected discoveries.

That celebration is facilitated most effectively by the commissioned works, including a video projected on the wall of a parking structure, a sculpture that makes drinking water and a one-time-only performance Sunday that featured David "The Human Cannonball" Smith flying over a U.S.-Mexico border fence with the greatest of ease — and surprising gracefulness.

To find these installations and performances, visitors must embark on self-guided scavenger hunts. The maps available at the information booths lack adequate detail, so you have to ask passersby for directions. All sorts of social intercourse ensue, not the least of which involves crazy conversations and the kindness of strangers. No two visitors have the same experience.

But the vitality sparked by this part of inSite 05 is dampened in the museum exhibition. Even sleek works that depart from the show's grunge aesthetic are inert in their roles as mute surrogates for ordinary objects.

These include Rita McBride's powder-coated aluminum control boxes and Ana Maria Tavares' steel hand railings and surveillance mirrors as well as Adriana Varejão's sculptures that could be horror movie props: ceramic tile walls that have cracked, revealing animal or human entrails beneath their squeaky-clean surfaces.

Marcelo Cidade's fake surveillance cameras, made of cardboard and installed high on the walls of nearly every gallery, are initially amusing but grow tedious long before you see the last one.

These sight gags embody the

exhibition's appreciation of scrappy, do-it-yourself ingenuity along with its attempt to elucidate abstract ideas about social control and authoritarian power, which falls short of what can be done in real sociological studies and research projects.

The largest and most brightly colored piece in the show is a spacious, environmentally sensitive outhouse built by Marjetica Potrc. It's identical to a latrine she installed in a shantytown in Caracas, Venezuela. In a museum context, it becomes a supersize rendition of Duchamp's famous urinal, a tongue-in-cheek game played by an art-savvy insider.

The photographers who value formal refinement manage to stand out. Works by Cao Guimarães, Catherine Opie and Thomas Struth reward repeated viewings because they do not merely record the superficial appearance of city life but capture, compress and concentrate some of its multilayered complexity — and mystery.

They are less naive, more worldly and more trusting of viewers, who are given much more substance and room in which to maneuver.

Paintings by Mark Bradford and Julie Merhetu function similarly but with even greater range and intensity. Calling to mind cosmic weather maps as well as cut-and-paste leftovers, these abstract collisions of micro- and macroscopic worlds stick in the mind's eye far longer than anything else on display. Their richly textured surfaces provide ample nooks and crannies to get lost in, just like city streets.

As a whole, however, "Farsites" takes too distant a stand from the mundane pleasures and frustrations of navigating the urban landscape. It transforms the unpredictability of city life into a disembodied experience that is generic, oversimplified and academic — in a word, virtual.

The exhibition trips over itself not because it occupies two public venues separated by an international border but because it turns its back on its locale, marching, often in lock step, along with the trends and conventions of higher-profile international exhibitions: a love of abjection and a fascination with a type of social activism that has been stripped of its consequences and is replayed as toothless stylishness.

A kinder, gentler version of two Kassel, Germany, shows — Documenta X, organized by Catherine David in 1997, and Documenta XI, organized by Okwui Enwezor in 2002 — Pedrosa's exhibition spends too much time addressing a clique of international curators at the expense of its local constituency. It was designed for jet-setters, not pedestrians.