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The Port District has acquired or commissioned more than \$10 million worth of art, including the widely praised ceramic and mirror mosaic sculpture of a face at the Convention Center called "Coming Together" (left) by the late artist Niki de Saint Phalle, and "Coastal Species Shuffle" by Tim Schirack.
K.C. Alfred / Union-Tribune photos

Public art put on hold

PUBLIC ART BY THE NUMBERS

Costs associated with the San Diego Unified Port District and its public art program:

\$131.4 million: Port District's operating budget for 2007-08

\$2.6 million: This year's public arts budget, which pays for a full-time staff of three, acquisitions, maintenance and unfinished projects from previous years.

\$641,400: This year's allocation for buying and borrowing new pieces of public art.

SOURCE: Unified Port of San Diego

Port commission halts new proposals so it can evaluate its program

By Maureen Magee, STAFF WRITER

It's the agency that brought the region everything from a giant sculpture of a sailor embracing a nurse and a stretch of glittering "urban trees" to surfboard benches, abstract mosaics and, perhaps next, a dramatically illuminated bay bridge.

The Unified Port of San Diego public art program has been loved and hated since it began more than a decade ago.

Art embraced by the public has frequently drawn the ire of critics and some in the art community. And several pieces proposed by well-regarded artists have been scrapped following controversy and public rejection — including an aviation-themed art park that for many evoked the 1978 PSA crash.

But now the Port District program is facing scrutiny over its budget, art selection process and relevance.

The port commission has halted any new art proposals until it can evaluate the 11-year-old program, its staffing and costs at a special workshop scheduled for September.

"Nobody is saying we don't like public art," Commissioner Michael Bixler said before calling a moratorium on art proposals last month. "But is this (program) in balance with the other obligations we have?"

The Port District has a \$131.4 million operating budget and oversees the tidelands, or public property along San Diego Bay and the Imperial Beach oceanfront. The port operates two marine cargo terminals and a cruise ship terminal and is the landlord to more than 600 waterfront businesses.

It sets aside half a percent of certain gross revenues, which comes to \$641,400 in the 2007-08 budget,

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A professor coined term 'plop art' for pieces that clutter

to buy and borrow new pieces of public art.

"This is not something the port is required to do," said Catherine Sass, who oversees the public art program. "It's really a gift."

Without any obligation, the port has been investing in public art for more than a decade.

This public collection is designed to spiff up the landscape of San Diego Bay. But Sass said it is also an important way to draw tourists and customers to waterfront businesses on the tidelands — everything from hotels and restaurants to shops and the cruise ship terminal.

The Port District has acquired or commissioned more than \$10 million worth of art that can be seen from San Diego to Imperial Beach and at Lindbergh Field, which the port operated until about four years ago.

The sculptures, murals, statues, fountains and plazas have stirred varying reactions over the years.

Take, for example, the 63-foot-long sculpture "Isis," by famed artist Mark di Suvero. The huge assembly of steel beams that has greeted motorists at the Laurel Street median at Harbor Drive for the past three years has generated its share of critics, who have been puzzled by the huge piece that is scheduled to come down later this month to make way for another on-loan installment.

Regardless of its reception, Sass said, the piece served a purpose in getting people to talk about art. The port art staff worked with San Diego's Commission for Arts and Culture in acquiring the temporary artwork.

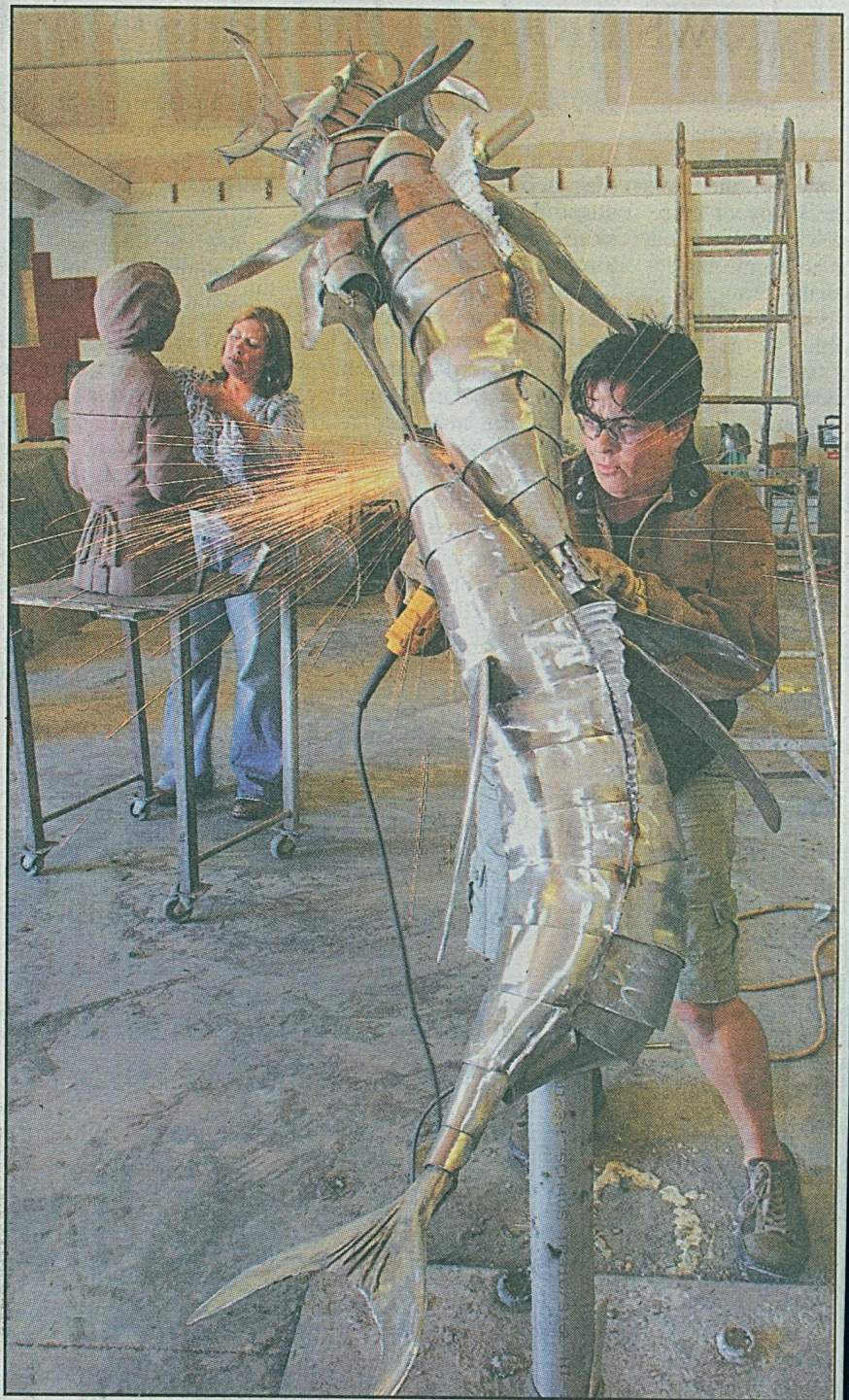
Although some pieces have been popular with locals and tourists, such as the 25-foot kissing couple, they have been panned as tacky and, in some cases, embarrassing by art experts and critics.

"I would rather see nothing than what we have," said Michael Krichman, executive director of inSITE, an international art exhibition for San Diego and Tijuana. "For me, it's a huge embarrassment," he said of much of the public art collection.

Other pieces that were embraced by the art community never materialized due to public outcry.

For example, the twisting collection of fiberglass boats that was to span a portion of Harbor Drive was halted in 1999 after so many people complained it resembled a shipwreck.

That piece by celebrated artist Nancy Rubins had the support of three



Valerie Salatino (right) and Nancy Moran worked on figures for a Unified Port of San Diego public art project called "The Cannery Works Tribute" at the waterfront Parque del Sol. Don Kohlbauer / Union-Tribune

agencies — including the port — but was scrapped by the Convention Center Corporation board after it was panned in the community.

Selecting something as subjective as art for the masses is no easy task.

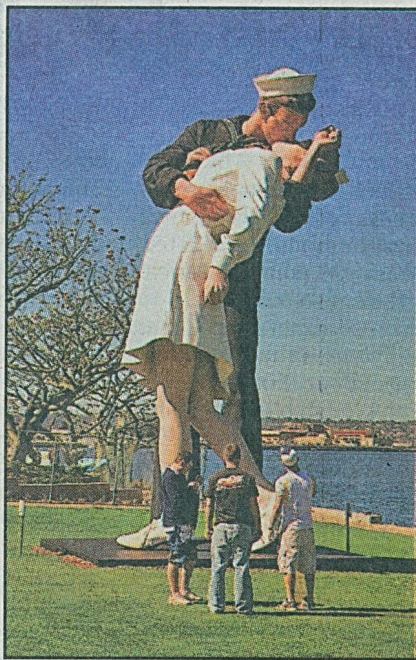
Depending on who's looking, a piece of art can be beautiful, intriguing, offensive or downright annoying. Put it in a museum or over a mantel and it is a showcase revered by admirers. But force art on the masses, along a sidewalk, in a park or at an intersection, and the response is guaranteed to stir debate.

Finding the right piece for the right spot is an art unto itself, said James

Wines, an architecture professor whose New York firm designs buildings and public art. The worst thing a city can do, he said, is to treat public art like something from a museum or studio.

"If it's successful, it looks like it belongs in the public domain and it draws energy from its surroundings," said Wines, who coined the term "plop art" to describe the sculptures and art pieces that he sees as clutter in many cities across the country.

Civic art programs and artists who fear controversy end up trying to duplicate what's been done elsewhere and almost always end up with a mess,



"Unconditional Surrender," a 25-foot-tall sculpture of a sailor smooching with a nurse, has proved popular with locals and tourists but has been panned by art experts and critics. *Michael Franklin / U-T*

he said. Wines and his firm, Sculpture in the Environment, lectures and works with cities, artists and architects on designing public spaces that invite public interaction.

"Unless San Diego tries to do something that reflects what makes the city tick, what makes it different from L.A., it will just end up with more dolphins," he said.

The Port District has done its best to please everyone with its selections.

But often it's the effort to please the masses that leads to generic developer-minded art that is "pressed into the service of economic development or tourism," said Krichman, who works with artists in San Diego and Tijuana for inSITE.

Sass defends the port's art collection.

"We have art that ties in with the military and the cannery workers, and some art people will never like that," she said. "This is art that gives a voice to communities that might not be heard . . . it is art that makes people nostalgic or brings them on the waterfront."

Not everything in the port's collection has the art world cringing.

There's the widely praised ceramic and mirror mosaic sculpture of a face at the Convention Center called "Coming Together," by the late artist Niki de Saint Phalle. Gail Roberts' "Treelines" is an acclaimed suite of paintings, and objects by Roberts adorn Terminal 2 at the San Diego International Airport. In May, the port agreed to spend \$300,000 to lease two installations by well-regarded artists for a year: Magdalena Abakanowicz's

large cast-iron "Walking Figures" and, to replace "Isis," a pair of giant engagement rings by Dennis Oppenheim.

However, members of the commission are second-guessing their practice of spending money on temporary art such as "Isis."

Bixler questioned the price tag for a \$400,000 sculpture show funded in the 2007-08 budget. Commission Chairwoman Sylvia Rios said the \$300,000 authorized in May for on-loan art gave her pause.

"I would rather see us invest in embedded art, art that is permanent and incorporated into buildings and architecture," Rios said. "It would be better than these passing fancies."

Officials with the public art program say temporary exhibits build public interest in art and supplement the permanent collection.

The public art budget for this fiscal year is set for \$2.6 million, which includes a full-time staff of three, art, maintenance and unfinished projects from previous years.

In addition, developers who build hotels and other projects on port-controlled tidelands are required to devote 1 percent of their budgets to art. San Diego officials recently implemented policy requiring developers to spend 2 percent of their budgets on public art in the city.

Nationwide, public art is funded in a variety of ways.

In Chicago, a city known worldwide for its public art, 1.3 percent of budgets for new or renovated city buildings is spent on public art. But developers are not required to incorporate public art in their private projects.

The "Chicago Picasso" in Daley plaza has become an icon for the Windy City, and San Diego's port has been searching for years for a similarly iconic piece of art for this region.

The first substantial proposal to come from that effort would illuminate the San Diego-Coronado Bridge from underneath with high-tech lighting. Port art officials plan to discuss the idea with the San Diego City Council next month.

While the port examines its art budget, it may also rethink its selection process. Currently, a public committee chooses the art after considering community input. Its choices are forwarded to the port commission, which has final say but rarely overrides the committee.

Rios said the September workshop is long overdue, and that it would likely lead to changes.

"I love art," she said. "But I don't like wasted opportunities."