

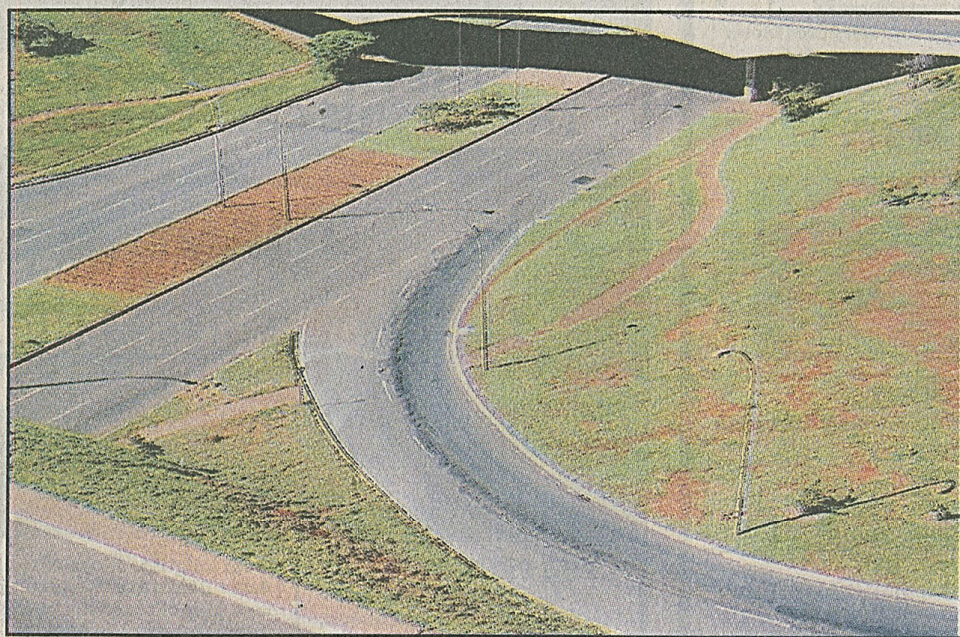
# arts

SUNDAY  
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THE SAN DIEGO  
UNION-TRIBUNE

2



In American photographer Sean Snyder's series "Brasilia," a metropolis built from scratch becomes a tarnished version of the modernist city where a section of the road, like its buildings, seems anonymous. *Galerie Neu*

## ART REVIEW

### Skeptical views of urban life

By Robert L. Pincus  
ART CRITIC

**C**ardboard makes repeat appearances in "Farsites." That may seem odd for an exhibition about the contemporary city. After all, cities required more durable materials to persist.

But then artists don't design actual urban centers. Even if they consider the present condition and the history of the metropolis, as the 50-plus artists in this exhibition do, the responses can take an impractical shape. Cardboard, in its fragility and impermanence, seems to reflect the skeptical

#### DATEBOOK

**"Farsites: Urban Crisis and Domestic Symptoms in Recent Contemporary Art"**  
Through Nov. 13

San Diego Museum of Art, Balboa Park

Centro Cultural Tijuana, Paseo de los Heroes y Javier Mina  
\$4-\$10 (San Diego Museum of Art); free (Centro Cultural)  
(619) 232-7931, (011-52-664) 687-9600 or [www.insite05.org](http://www.insite05.org)

view of the city, past and present, that pervades this exhibition spanning two museums, two cities and two countries.

Divided between the San Diego Museum of Art in Balboa Park and the Centro Cultural Tijuana, "Farsites: Urban Crisis and Domestic Symptoms in Recent Contemporary Art" is a counterpart to the 22 "interventions" that are central to inSITE05, the many-faceted event whose artworks concurrently span sites on both sides of the border.

The interventions, curated by Osvaldo Sánchez, tend to enmesh themselves in some aspect of the local environment and social conditions. By doing so, they establish a

SEE 'Farsites,' F7



► **'FARSITES'**

CONTINUED FROM F1

**Exhibit spans  
two museums,  
two countries**

strong bond between artist and receptive viewer.

In "Farsites," Adriano Pedrosa, a Sao Paulo curator who is well known internationally, aims to make broad commentary about the contemporary state of city life. But the tone of the exhibition is abstract. The sense of urban crisis never becomes more than a vague concept, and keeps our emotions and involvement at a low ebb.

It's hard not to think of the terrible urban crisis of New Orleans while viewing the exhibition, simply because this show is so much about cities. But the exhibition deals very little with cataclysmic disasters and concentrates instead on a vague sense of decline and dystopia in urban and suburban settings. Some selections are tied to the show's broad theme only by their allusions to architecture or domestic interiors.

One series of photographs, installed throughout both venues, is obviously meant to be emblematic. Geraldine Lanteri, an Argentine artist, pictures place after place with shuttered windows and bolted doors. The black-and-white images (made between 2001 and 2004) are matter of fact, presenting a sort of repetition meant to create the misery of

her nation's economic collapse of 2001.

The suburbs are no better. The house as fortress is Kendall Geers' topic. The South African photographer pictures fences, walls and security signs. He calls the series "Suburbia" (1999); its political backdrop is the demise of apartheid and the onset of a newer, tense chapter in South African history.

The home that turns a mute face to the street is one subject of Los Angeles photographer Catherine Opie's large 1995 color prints of homes in the opulent Bel-Air neighborhood, most with security force signs out front, too.

Surveillance and security is one of Brazilian Marcelo Cidade's subjects too. He's installed numerous cardboard versions of security cameras throughout both venues.

A particularly intriguing series of photographs by American Sean Snyder reminds us of the failure of the modernist vision of the model city, with its emphasis on concrete, steel, glass and the grid as well as its utopian undercurrent. Brasília, his subject, is such a place.

Though the 45-year-old city is the functioning capital of Brazil, Snyder presents it as a sort of contemporary ruin, its buildings darkening where they should be pristine, weeds sprouting through walkways and not a person in sight.

Like a lot of exhibitions that aim for the big social statement and the prominent international cast of artists, "Farsites" doesn't offer much emotional comfort. Maybe



**Geraldine Lanteri's photographs "Negocios Cerrados" (2001-2004), depicting shuttered businesses in Argentina, are divided between the San Diego Museum of Art and Tijuana's Centro Cultural. Geraldine Lanteri**

that's to be expected when "crisis" is part of the exhibition's title and the world is fraught with political and economic tensions.

Few among Pedrosa's selections suggest an alternative vision to the modernist idea of the sleek, well-functioning metropolis. Mostly, cities look dysfunctional. In addition to the closed businesses Lanteri depicts there are "Casas cegas" or "blind houses" by Brazilian photographer Rochelle Costi. That is, houses with windows and doors bricked in so squatters can't make themselves at home. But Costi's picture is clearly a metaphor too — for a whole portion of the urban population, in a host of countries, that can't find hous-

ing.

The idea of architectural decay is made surreally literal in painted wood sculptures by another Brazilian, Adriana Varejão. (Given his nationality, it's not surprising that Pedrosa would include a prominent number of Brazilians.) Varejão's objects resemble fragments of floors or walls, whose underlayer looks like an amalgam of meat or human organs. An aura of violence, directed toward old buildings, animals and people, pervades them.

In the show's predominantly dark scenario, which makes "Blade Runner" resemble a sort of prophecy, you look for emotional relief wherever you can find it.

There is the occasional ex-

ample of artistic community as a sort of bright spot in city life. Such is the case with Eloisa Cartonera, a modest publishing venture in which artists and writers worked with *cartoneros* (collectors of used cardboard) in Buenos Aires beginning at the time of the 2001 economic collapse. The little volumes, with vividly painted covers, are bound in roughly cut cardboard and have an unpolished beauty that makes them distinctive.

Cidade's performance/architectural fragment, "In/Out," has a droll take on the anonymity of maintenance work. Watch his video and you'll see him yanking tiles from the sidewalks of Sao Paulo and replacing them with his own. Hardly anyone seems to look his way; they just assume he's an official worker. Then, nearby, in the galleries of the SDMA, is the collection of tiles, arranged in a loose grid.

Another moment of delight is provided by Guadalajara artist José Davila. He's fashioned columns from castoff cardboard cartons. Every element of them comes from the museum's garbage. One dimension of their success is placement. A pair of them, at either end of a doorway, look as if they belong there. One plays off the other, with a "classic salads" box of one stack neatly echoing the other.

Some heavily exposed artists are represented by solid works: Robert Gober's "Drains" (1989) is one; Julie

Merhetu's big painting "Dispersion" is another. But the exhibition gains little thematic momentum from their inclusion, only names of note.

By contrast, ersatz architecture, as in Davila's columns, gains another terrific example with Portuguese artist Carlo Bunga's walkthrough corridor in cardboard. It takes up much of a hallway. Walk through it and around it. Inside it's dominated by a cardboard ceiling, walls and floor in browns and blues. Outside, it's mostly white.

Hard to tell what it has to do with the show's title, since it's specifically geared to the museum. But it is an ingenious construction, so one hardly cares.

In the bigger picture, "Farsites" ends up being a counterpart to the bigger crop of inSITE05 interventions, but not as intended. It becomes a study in contrast more than a complement. There is an implicit optimism, or at least pragmatism, in some of the projects spread across Tijuana and San Diego. In "Farsites" the vision is mostly that of urban noir.

No reason that inSITE05 shouldn't have competing curatorial visions. It's left to us, the viewers, to reconcile them or not. Art, like the times, is full of contradictions.

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