

From formidable to forgettable

By Robert L. Pincus, ART CRITIC

A dense profusion of herbs at the Santa Fe train depot, a giant, two-headed wooden horse at the San Ysidro border crossing, a lavishly decorated 1955 Ford Victoria stuffed with paper roses, perched on a mound of dirt in Tijuana's Colonia Libertad: Those are just a smattering of the sights generated by inSITE97, the expansive, three-month exhibition that closed last Sunday across San Diego and Tijuana.

The array of locales alone — from La Jolla to downtown San Diego to National City to the colonias of Tijuana — made this a highly unusual exhibition. But geographical reach, in terms of sites, does not a distinguished show make. Nor does the notion of bringing many artists here, from throughout the hemisphere, to create original works. Those concepts are all for the good. But you can fulfill them and still end up with forgettable art.

What an exhibition such as inSITE97 requires is artists who embrace their charge passionately, obsessively, extravagantly, wittily . . . choose your desired quality. In the end, though, the art must convince us it cried out to be made. Said another

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way, if inSITE97 hadn't existed, we'd be aesthetically poorer for that work never having been realized.

How fortunate for us that even a minority of the contributions to inSITE97 fit that description. Inspired installations or objects, even if they weren't great in number, more than justify this massive show of new art.

Betsabée Romero's "Jute Car" was a remarkable work. The artist, who lives and works in Mexico City, turned its exterior into an immense floral pattern. Its interior is stuffed with paper roses. Its setting, a steep hill near the steel fence that separates the United States from Mexico, made the work look all the more arresting. But it's not hard to see that even though Romero has driven it off the site already, it remains a dazzling object. May her project enter a public collection sometime soon.

"Jute Car" was wonderful, not only for its visual presence, but because its retinal qualities intersect so fully with its social and philosophical concerns. She turned the car on its head — symbolically speaking. In social terms, the auto has long been



JOHN GIBBINS / Union-Tribune

Floral arrangements: Betsabée Romero's "Jute Car," generously patterned on the outside and filled with paper roses, helped make inSITE97 memorable.

inSITE97

Event invariably mixed the marvelous, mediocre

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claimed by guys as their domain: to customize and to decorate. But Romero's custom job is aggressively feminine. Even its title — which alludes to the material of a famous cloth on which the Virgin of Guadalupe was reported to have materialized — speaks to her preoccupation with female icons.

"Rowing in Eden," an installation at the Santa Fe train depot, displayed that same wonderful sense of balance between physical form and concept. It was an excursion into history, a look at women's medicinal and pharmacological knowledge of plants and herbs through the centuries. The setting — an aged baggage room no longer in use — was just right, since it possesses its own historical patina.

The riot of plants and herbs that Deborah Small assembled with collaborator Patricia Mendenhall, an expert gardener, established a continuity between past and present,

nature and us. Music composed by William Bradbury, along with his collage of sounds, created precisely the right atmosphere, as did the voice of Dana Case reading writings by Small and others. The artist's multimedia visual and aural composition — also a separate work unto itself — was the glue that bound together the entire project, full of hypnotically lovely imagery, poetry and stories.

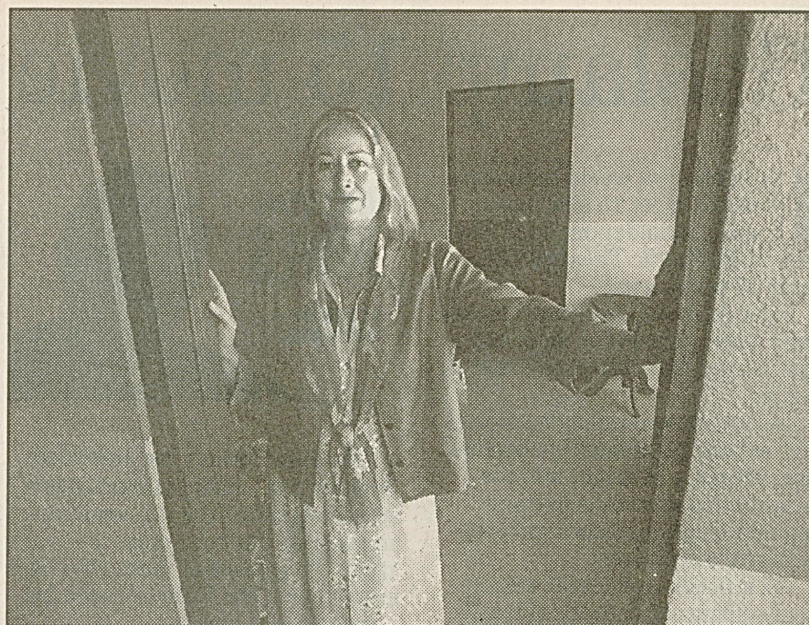
In both of those examples, the extreme passion for turning ideas into objects distinguished the art. Perhaps it's no coincidence that each of those works had a spiritual dimension. Each also seemed like a devotional act; for those projects, as for Robert Gober's unforgettable installation now at the Geffen Contemporary in Los Angeles, grace was embedded in the making.

Neither work was world-weary or ironic — stances that have become a staple of visual art and, more generally, of American cultural life. In different ways, Romero, as well as Small and her collaborators, manages to be straightforwardly expressive without trying to turn back the art historical clock. Perhaps that's why their works seem so fresh.

Indelible art

Two stellar projects alone would justify a massive, \$2 million undertaking like inSITE97. After all, you can't put a price on indelible art.

Still, those weren't the only works that made inSITE97 memorable. Even irony found vigorous adherents — Eduardo Abaroa's project, "Black Star," and Rubén



JOHN GIBBINS / Union-Tribune

Radiant rooms: *Patricia Patterson applied her vision of color to walls of a rented space in Tijuana's Colonia Altamira.*

Ortiz Torres's "Alien Toy/ U.C.O. (Unidentified Cruising Object)" prime among them.

Abaroa provided little toys in clear, plastic bubbles, with instruction sheets for how to use them in satanic rituals. And if you were to walk the path required to visit all the dispensing machines where his toys were available, your stroll would have created a pentagram. Devilishly funny stuff.

Working with expert car customizer Sal "Chava" Muñoz, Ortiz Torres came up with a kinetic truck that doubled as art. (In the car world, it's called a radical bed danc-

er.) The vehicle, built by Muñoz, stars in a funny video full of sci-fi imagery. For the installation in a National City warehouse, the truck was both projector and sculpture.

Thomas Glassford's "City of Green," though less sublimely ironic, was still rollicking good parody. He starred in his own video, as a secret agent in black who runs around the region finding golf holes everywhere: in car trunks, in civic plazas and on rooftops. Blended into the real promotional videos at downtown San Diego's International Information Center, his tape served as a good-natured satire on the notion of Southern/Baja California as a paradise for play.

Several other works should, by all rights, have an afterlife in viewers' psyches. Among them: Patricia Patterson's transformation of leased rooms in a Tijuana (Colonia Altamira) home into a three-dimensional version of a painting, done in collaboration with Trinidad de León; Jamex and Einar de la Tor-

inSITE97

Street isn't right address for cryptic art

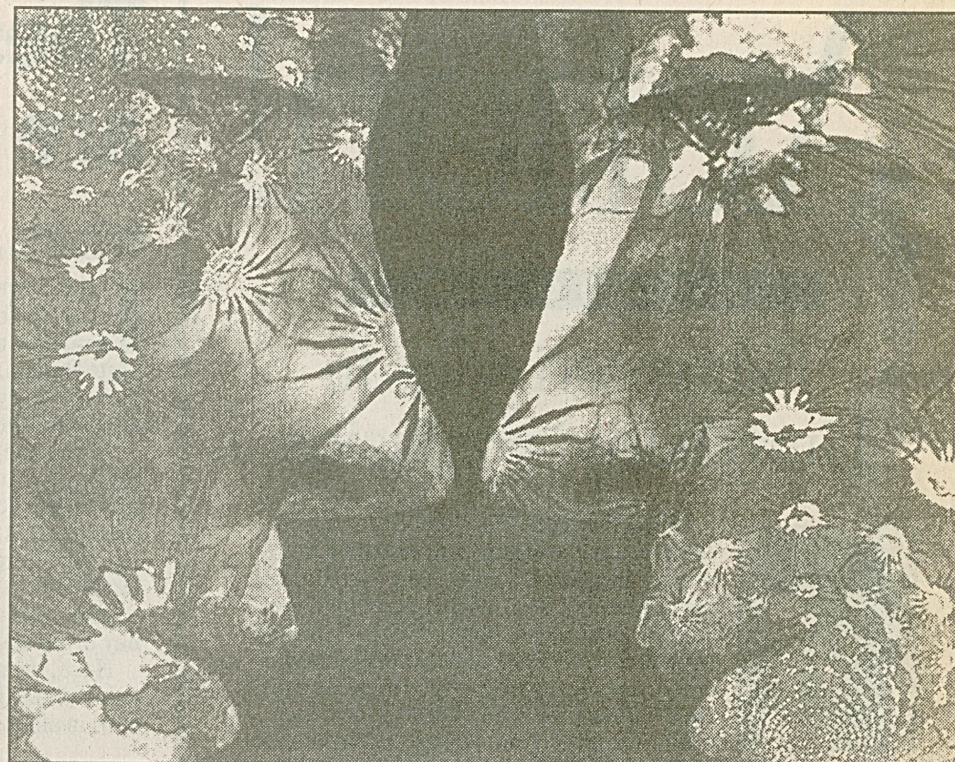
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res' perversely surreal glass pyramid, which rose to the ceiling in Tijuana's Centro Cultural; Fernando Arias' room-length blade in "The Line," a dramatic, glistening, sinister sculptural symbol for the border itself, which occupied a room at downtown San Diego's ReinCarnation Project; and the dramatic update of the Trojan Horse with its two heads on the Mexican side of the border, created by Marcos Ramírez ("Erre"), in collaboration with Hugo Josué Castro Mejia, Javier Galaviz Sánchez, José Julio Orozco García and Alejandro Zacarías Soto.

Inevitably, with this sort of show, there is art that the muses never blessed. Their chief liability: substituting novelty for inspiration. A case in point was Melanie Smith's sendup of an information center for tourists on Fifth Avenue in downtown San Diego. Its presentation wasn't particularly ingenious, nor were the postcards purveyed there.

Blurring the boundary between life and art is a conventional idea by now. The crucial precedent for Smith's "center" is Claes Oldenburg's "The Store," done in 1961. But if an artist borrows an old conceit, it goes without saying that he or she needs to give it new life. That didn't happen.

There's no reason to single out Smith for criticism. There were other contrived works among the 42 realized by 50 artists. Let's just



DEBORAH SMALL

Computer-generated images: *The “Rowing in Eden” installation by Deborah Small, William Bradbury, Dana Case and Patricia Mendenhall included an image, word and sound piece that screened continuously amid evocative surroundings.*

mention a couple more, rather than dwell on the negatives. It was unfortunate to have a highly visible site like the Casino Theatre marquis, in downtown San Diego, devoted to a puzzling take on native North Americans. If Rebecca Belmore had complex motivations for installing her sideways portraits of one woman, dubbed “Awasinake (On the Other Side),” they were virtually impossible to decode. And the street just isn’t the right ad-

dress for cryptic art.

Helen Escobedo, who for inSITE94 placed a compelling work on the beaches of Tijuana, worked with collaborators Alberto Caro-Limon, Armando Lavat and Franco Mendez Calvillo on a goofy but not funny installation about the making of milk. It was to be found at the ReinCarnation Project, site of a former milk processing plant in downtown San Diego. But the artists’ attempts to connect with the history

of the place and mix in commentary about milk production were utterly forced.

Failed projects aren’t evidence of a failed exhibition. Taking in the mediocre with the marvelous is simply a given with shows devoted to new art — especially ones such as inSITE97, which consist of newly commissioned works. It’s a risk that the inSITE97 organizers had to take, if they were to stage an event on this scale.

Are there artists who are going to be self-indulgent when given the freedom that this kind of exhibition presents? Without a doubt. The most egregious example was Andrea Fraser’s “Inaugural Speech,” which preceded Laurie Anderson’s performance on opening night. Her sardonic talk/performance was funny at the 10-minute mark and a disaster by its close many minutes later. (I lost count at about the half-hour mark.)

Since inSITE is a triennial event, it will be staged in the millennial year, without forcing the issue. One can speculate that this major turning of the clock might even replace the border as the biggest subject of the art made for inSITE2000. Or will it be dubbed inSITE00? Whatever the organizers choose to call it, I just have one request: no opening-night speech about the meaning of millennium, unless it’s 15 minutes or less.