

Sculptures celebrate 'hidden' Balboa Park

It's a safe bet that few San Diegans know that an unusual cluster of outdoor sculptures are in progress in the eastern reaches of Balboa Park. Pershing Drive is the closest paved thoroughfare to Cindy Zimmerman's big creations in adobe, which reside south of the Velodrome and the Balboa Park nursery.

To see the giant '50s-style toaster, the observation tower for birds or the labyrinth in straw, you'll need to get off beaten tracks and onto a road designated for authorized vehicles. Zimmerman hopes the art she and a host of collaborators have been creating, called "The Great Balboa Park Landfill Exposition of 1997," will make this track more beaten in the days, months and years to come.

She's been on site all summer and as her projects near completion, it will have a coming out on Oct. 25 and 26 in the form of a festival, with environmental presentations, performances, hikes and activities centering on the labyrinth.

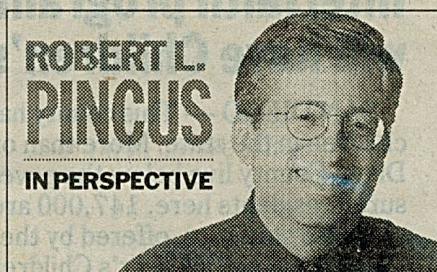
If you're wondering why the word "landfill" is in the title of Zimmerman's project, that's because the very terrain on which these sculptures sit was a solid-waste dumping ground, beginning with the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in Balboa Park and lasting for 59 years.

The hiring of an artist to do something with this remote part of the park is part of the city of San Diego's Balboa Park East Mesa Precise Plan. Zimmerman hasn't tried to fill the site. It would take more than a few months to do so.

Besides, that isn't the goal for the project. The aim is to change the perception of the former landfill site from unused territory to a usable portion of the park, to make it inviting rather than off-putting.

"We want to supply a new narrative for this land," Zimmerman says.

"Or, perhaps uncover an old one," she muses, alluding to the Kumeyaays who once roamed this same



landscape.

"Artists follow magical belief systems. I very much want to give this place more Earth energy, stir it up. I like to think of these small interventions as acupuncture," observes Zimmerman, part pragmatist, part sturdy idealist and veteran public artist. She sounds a trifle embarrassed to make such a claim, even as she lets you know, through her expression and tone of voice, that she believes aesthetic sorcery just might be plausible.

Her own statement about these structures is worth quoting: "The earthen structures are intended to provide information, a joke, a warning and place to rest for humans. For animals and plants they may provide shade, cover from predators, a roost for others, and perhaps some moisture retention for the rainy season ahead."

To her, collaborative art is the only sort of art appropriate to the locale. The process is, perhaps, more important than the art objects themselves. Girl Scouts have helped her mix the adobe. Middle school and college students have lent their hands too, as have North Park residents.

The comic flair of the sculptures, though, clearly carries the imprint of Zimmerman, known for her colorful, whimsical paintings and for her many contributions to the Fern Street Circus, which she and her husband John Highkin established.

Zimmerman admits that the exposition isn't as far along as she would like.

"If you show up, I might put you to work," says a smiling Zimmerman, in a broad-brimmed hat and clothes that feature a patina of dirt.