



JOHN GIBBINS / Union-Tribune

**Rich kitsch:** *Menacing arms holding jagged bottles coexist with Aztec masks in "El Niño" (detail), a huge, pyramidal sculpture by Jamex and Einar de la Torre at Tijuana's Centro Cultural.*

## Boldest inSITE art doesn't sit on fence



**By Ann Jarmusch**  
ARTS CRITIC

**T**IJUANA — Americans have built a triple fence along the San Diego-Tijuana border to keep out human beings. The act is a wartime tactic shrieking for attention and analysis.

Inevitably, several artists who are participating in inSITE97 — an international exposition of projects in public spaces in both cities — use border tensions and quandaries as a catalyst for provocative art.

Three sites here offer contrasting stages for their art and provide intriguing vantage points for looking at the border region and all that it implies.

One site is the monumental, formal Centro Cultural in the Rio Zone. Its opposite is the eerily quiet beachfront at

Playas de Tijuana, where the border fence divides a few Mexican concession stands and the bullring from San Diego's Border State Park before plunging into the ocean.

Still another unexpected site hugs the colorful and chaotic San Ysidro border-crossing traffic lanes on the Tijuana side. Northbound passengers stuck in line need only turn their heads to the right for a big surprise.

At all those venues, inSITE97 artworks examine border crossings and disconnections: physical, verbal, environmental and symbolic. Those are not the only subjects taken up by inSITE artists, but they are the ones that resonate with the power of place and time.

At the government-run Centro Cultural (known locally as CECUT, pro-

nounced "say-coot"), Los Angeles-based photographer and critic Allan Sekula is exhibiting a brash and honest portrait of life on both sides of the border. His large, color photographs were shot during the past year in uncomfortably disparate sites. Among them are a glitzy San Diego hotel serving the 1996 Republican National Convention, a ramshackle shantytown where a barefoot couple steams mussels they plucked from the nearby sea, and the movie set for "The Titanic," shot south of Rosarito.

Sekula's framed photographs are hung alone, or in contrasting pairs that speak volumes, or in triptychs that offer a hint of cinematic narrative. Seku-



# inSITE97

Artists' works reflect contrasts in cultures

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la ironically yet democratically contrasts a shirtless street person, a cigarette hanging out of his scowling face and belly hanging over his trousers, with a svelte young Republican proudly displaying an elephant tattoo on his bare chest.

Handling cruise-ship passengers' luggage, boxing cans of tuna, preparing for a military invasion, constructing coffins in a room plastered with photos of leggy, buxom women who are the picture of life — all are everyday events on both sides of the border.

The photographs speak for themselves about power and drudgery, arrogance and empowerment, glamour and simplicity. A bonus is Sekula's wall-mounted statement about this body of work, titled "Dead Letter Office," and the disrespect heaped on this part of the New World.

He writes: "Those who identify, consciously or not, with the white adventurers who seized . . . (Alta) California from Mexican cattle ranchers in the 1840s continue to regard the long peninsula of Baja California as a kind of vestigial organ, a primeval reptilian tail. Here in the place of escape, drunkenness and dreams, it is permissible to vomit without shame.

"The dream-work performed by the 'white system' imagines 'Baja,' a lower space, as a utopia of childhood freedoms, a space in which lobsters can be devoured ravenously, vehicles driven with reckless abandon. The fugitives in Hollywood films invariably seek the border, as if no laws held beyond."



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**Head turner:** Standing nearly 33 feet tall at the San Ysidro border crossing, a wood sculpture called "Toy and Horse" brings dignity and mystery to the jumble of shops, northbound traffic and street vendors.



## Striking pairs

Sekula's work is a polished, museum-style photography show with an edge. So are the pair of colorful, billboard-inspired panels that Ken Lum, a Canadian artist from Vancouver, British Columbia, is exhibiting nearby. In one blast of text and a photo of a person in the street, the panels capture the polarities of urban life in Tijuana and San Diego. Both people are dressed in T-shirts and running shoes and are seated on a curb or step. The similarities stop there.

One photo shows a dark-haired, young boy selling candy and cigarettes. He passes the time by singing a Mexican lullaby quoted in the sing-song text adjacent to the photograph of him. The other, a young, middle-class woman, inquires into her cell phone, in rapid-fire fashion, about ordering the ethnic food du jour: Mexican or Chinese.

A refreshingly playful universal communication device is the "Toaster Work Wagon," a Kim Adams creation that moved from place to place in this city and San Diego before being parked inside the museum. Made of van parts and twin car hoods that pop up like wings, the white wagon carried customized bicycles-built-for-two for small kids to use at will. The catch: The bikes have two sets of handlebars, facing in opposite directions, but only one working set of pedals. One kid must steer and propel the bike; the other must settle for steering ability only.

The moral of this binational child's play? Cooperation or collapse.

"Esoteric Kiosk," Mexico City

## ART REVIEW

### "inSITE97"

*Works by 50 artists at 24 sites throughout San Diego and Tijuana. Through Nov. 30. Bus tours available. (619) 544-1482.*

artist Pable Vargas Lugo's gleaming-white version of a newsstand, joins real street-vendor food carts as it rises meekly from the centro's vast front plaza. Only two faux newspapers appear on its racks — the curling, yellowing front pages of *The New York Times* and *El Financiero* — and they are printed out of focus and backward.

Copies of the staid, respectable U.S. paper outnumber by more than 2-to-1 the Mexican financial paper, which is tinged with sensationalism. The news racks remain full of papers, as an indifferent public passes by.

### Playas de Tijuana

Across town to the west at Playas de Tijuana is Louis Hock's site-specific, interactive installation called "International Waters." This rudimentary work consists of a galvanized-metal water-storage tank connected to rusty-looking pipes that form twin drinking fountains on both sides of the border. Its components are almost as rusted and crudely constructed as the mixed-media border fence they pierce.

(The fence, only one-fence-deep here, is an unforgettable piece of work in itself. Nearly 150 years ago, when the international boundary was drawn, there was no fence,

only a free-standing stone marker in the civilized form of an obelisk. Later, U.S. border-keepers fashioned east-west wings of chain-link fence onto both sides of the obelisk. The metal mesh provides a window into both countries and the possibility for touching and talking across the line. Several years ago, officials extended the chain-link fence with sections of ominous, tall steel wall. Warning signs to potential illegal border-crossers and graffiti add layers of meaning on the Mexican side.)

With "International Waters," Hock, a San Diego-based artist-activist, has created a sculptural life-spring that encapsulates a border-region problem — the availability of clean drinking water, and environmental politics. The potable water Hock offers the public, according to a plaque affixed to the fence, "accumulated from rains to the north and south of this bluff 10,000 years ago." In other words, eons before there was a Mexico or a United States of America.

By straddling the border, Hock delivers equitable, if humble, water distribution — a condition untrue to life in Tijuana. His border-crossing pipes also mock the U.S. government's attempt to bisect the land and the ocean with the forbidding fence that extends into the water.

"Island on the Fence/Island on the Tide" is another work designed to defy the border fence, but in the water at Playas. "Island" should appear to breathe and roll with the tides, which, as far as we know, claim no citizenship. Conceived by the internationally known New York artist Vito Acconci, "Island" was not installed and may not be until spring, because of engineering challenges and heavy surf.

On the Mexican side of the San Ysidro border gates, a large, two-headed horse sculpture on wheels stands above the crowd of cars, vendors and market stalls. "Toy and Horse," a nearly 33-foot-tall wood sculpture by Tijuana artist Marcos Ramírez "ERRE," has one noble head facing Mexico and its twin

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looking toward the United States.

The elegance of that well-crafted sculpture (this horse's noble pedigree must include Greek and Etruscan ancestors) is all the more remarkable amid the crush and cacophony of border guards and vendors, signs of every description and horn-honking drivers.

Comparisons to the duplicitous Trojan horse used to cross battle lines are inevitable, but this two-headed horse possesses one sturdy body. Could this body represent the Americas that Clinton tried to link inextricably during his recent trip to Latin America to promote trade? The artist is selling T-shirts bearing a likeness of the sculpture to tourists and commuters near the sculpture's base. If all goes as planned, he'll soon be selling souvenir plaster replicas, too.



The border and sticking points between the two countries on either side of it aren't the only issues on inSITE artists' minds.

At Centro Cultural, Jamex and Einar de la Torre, brothers who live both in Ensenada and San Diego, are exhibiting an exuberantly gaudy, kitsch-rich sculpture in the form of a stepped pyramid that nearly brushes the museum's high ceiling. Called "El Niño," this tongue-in-cheek work plays with cultural stereotypes, from the macho fighting arms of Aztecs wielding jagged-glass bottles to bullfighters depicted on black velvet.

Through vertical slots in all four pyramid walls, you can see Day-Glo-colored baby Jesus dolls, suspended as if they are falling toward and into a hellish-red pit. At night, the glowing colors are intensified by cobalt-blue lighting mounted inside the pyramid. Despite its visual impact, this intricate sculpture boils down to a simplistic attack on the Catholic Church. Some of the Jesus dolls have broken during their tumble from the pyramid's crown and their fragments are scattered on hell's floor.

At Playas de Tijuana is an outdoor installation as enigmatic as "El Niño" is direct. The defining element of "Untitled Depot," by Nari Ward, who was born in Jamaica and lives in New York, is a host of old and scarred submarine doors standing upright. Anchored by concrete freeway barriers and boulders, they loosely form the ghost of a submarine, as if the sub sank, then slammed up on the beach, struggling to upright itself and stand at attention.

More free-standing doors within the submarine shape create random paths for visitors to move through the space it creates, gravel crunching underfoot. Inexplicably, in the center is an elevated boxing ring with yellow ropes and a red carpet stretched over castoff bed springs.

Venturesome visitors will climb onto this makeshift trampoline, perhaps to get a sense of the rolling seas and to cross to the sub's other half. With sailor's decorative decals and Navy regulations still posted on many of the aging doors, this sea-worn relic hints at nature's ultimate power over human life, no matter how regimented.

In Tijuana, the strongest and most memorable inSITE97 works are those that stir and splash the region's boiling caldron of social and political issues and dive into the stark dichotomy between poverty and wealth. Addressing those and other border issues is not a requirement for inSITE's participating artists, but perhaps it should be. What better launching pad for contemporary art than this perplexing region?

Tijuana and San Diego are woven together and ripped apart by border crossings (from merely tedious to deadly), shared traditions and culture clashes, and debatable priorities for human life. Artists can show and tell us much about these complexities in ways no one else can.