

ART REVIEW

Art works head off into the wilds

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

To see Mark Dion's "Blind/Hide," one of the most engaging projects of the sprawling art exhibition inSITE2000, you'll find yourself walking a pathway at the Tijuana River Estuary in Imperial Beach. It's a dramatic setting because the nature reserve, a habitat for some magnificent birds, abuts Navy property where helicopters take off and land frequently.

It takes several minutes of strolling to reach Dion's modest structure, which has a kind of camouflage exterior and offers refuge and binoculars

DATEBOOK

inSITE2000

Through Feb. 28

Works at various locales in San Diego and Tijuana

Information and centers: 923 First Ave., San Diego and Centro Cultural Tijuana, Paseo Heroes y Mina

Free

(619) 544-1482 or 011-52-66-84-0095.

for bird-watching. But getting there is half the point: His piece is as much about simply experiencing the place as what he placed there.

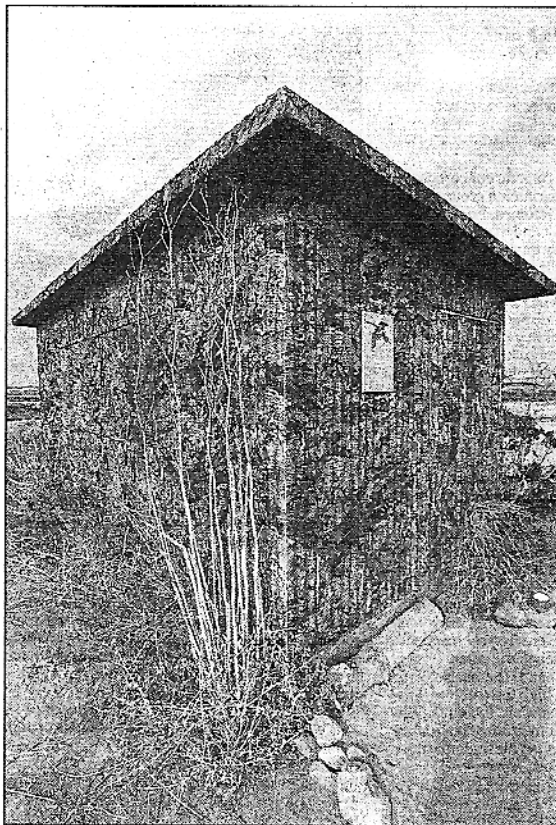
This is one of the genuine virtues of this inSITE, as in the three previous inSITEs. This year's exhibition takes us to places we might not otherwise venture, even if we do live here. Just to view Dion's "Blind/Hide," you'll have to get a key at the Tijuana Estuary Visitors Center, which appealingly explains the reserve's history.

The artist's structure is a cross between a bird blind, a meditation on the history of California naturalism and a place to reflect on the sheer variety of birds that thrive in this estuary. Numerous species are listed on a board. Pictures of pioneering naturalists, like John Muir, grace the interior, and there is a library of books about birds and other aspects of nature.

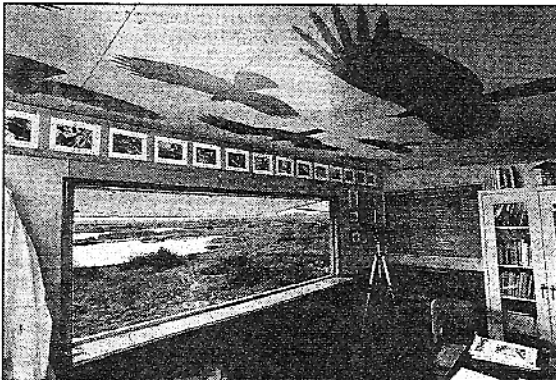
Dion, who lives in Pennsylvania, is the perfect type of artist for a site like the estuary. For nearly two decades, he has created work that delves into the complexities of environmental issues. His "Landfill," a life-size diorama depicting an environment that natural history museums ignore, was seen earlier this year at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.

The inSITE2000 artists have avoided museums, with few exceptions. But for one pair of collaborators, Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid from New York, it's the only logical locale. Two paintings by the artists, collaborators since 1978, are slyly inserted into the collection of Balboa Park's San Diego Museum of Art. This is as it should be, since the images look like a Sunday painter's take on Impressionism in one example, and academic realism in the other.

The pictures themselves are positively banal. One features two women



Mark Dion's "Blind/Hide," created for inSITE 2000, is a small, temporary structure conducive to bird-watching and meditating on the landscape.
Jerry Rife / Union-Tribune



The interior of "Blind/Hide" is artfully decorated with photographs of Tijuana Estuary birds, an avian ceiling pattern and a library of nature books.
Jerry Rife / Union-Tribune

in bathing suits, lounging on the beach, as a dolphin frolics in the ocean. On a hill above them is a handsome villa. The other painting

contains a couple of men standing near the ocean, digging with shovels. On a hill above them is some sort of Aztec- or Mayan-style pyramid. A

wild cat crouches nearby.

Painting by numbers

Why these paintings got made is far more interesting than the pictures themselves. The artists conducted polls and used the results to make these pictures. The new pair of paintings are part of their larger project called the Most Wanted Paintings, created in the United States and elsewhere. And for inSITE2000, they polled hundreds of people in San Diego and Tijuana to determine the pictures' size, color, subject and style, producing one canvas in each city that mirrors the findings.

Of course, the whole enterprise is preposterous, deadpan drollery. Simultaneously, it speaks seriously — well, at least halfway seriously — to our national obsession with polling, the controversies surrounding public art and the conventional arguments about the esotericism of much modern and contemporary art. Give people what the numbers say they want and they'll be happy. Or will they? This is the implied argument.

But you have to wonder: Wouldn't people want these pictures to be beautifully rendered? Aren't the artists cheating just a bit by making them look so downright clumsy?

Komar and Melamid's paintings will move south, as they should, since one supposedly reflects the popular taste of Tijuana. After closing in San Diego on Dec. 24, they go on view Jan. 19 to Feb. 25 at the Centro Cultural in Tijuana.

Objects aren't the order of the show in this inSITE. Fleeting events, films and alterations of the everyday environment are.

The Chilean-born, New York-based Alfredo Jaar, widely known for his photographic projects involving exploited workers and refugees, staged an opening-weekend event for his project "The Cloud," as he titled it, was dubbed a ceremony. He designed it as a kind of visual elegy to those who have died trying to cross the border from Mexico into the United States. And he chose a location well-known as a place for such crossings: Tijuana's Goat Canyon.

Beautiful music was performed live: such lovely compositions as Albinoni's "Adagio" and Bach's Second Movement from his Brandenburg Concerto No. 5. Poems were read in Spanish. The visual element was the release of thousands of white helium balloons, which looked rather lovely drifting off into space.

But for reasons hard to pinpoint, the event seemed contrived and slightly maudlin. The connection of a good portion of the audience to those who died is abstract, and that was surely part of the problem. The balloons were also a pale sort of visual memorial to the suffering of those who have perished in this terrain starkly divided by the fence.

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