

inSITE97

inSITE covers ground, does not break it

For a three-year art project meant to galvanize consciousness in Tijuana and San Diego, inSITE97's ideas and artifacts are sadly insubstantial.

Alongside the U.S. Customs line at the San Ysidro border crossing is a large, two-headed Trojan horse. Behind an old door at the Santa Fe Station downtown, there's a fetid roomful of plants. And, where the border fence goes into the Pacific Ocean, there's a new fountain with, according to a metal plaque by the artist Louis Hock, potable water.

Otherwise, the 42 artworks must be hunted down, in cultural buildings, obscure neighborhoods and whimsically unlikely sites like tattoo parlors and tourist information centers.

Nothing really grabs at the public throat.

The institutional concept of the nine-week show seems to be, "Gee, just look at the way these two countries bump up against each other here." So, the premise is unlikely to attract much attention.

WELTON JONES

CRITIC-AT-LARGE



INSIDE:

What can go wrong, what can go right at inSITE97. Review by art critic Robert L. Pincus.
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Perhaps the best-known artist involved is Vito Acconci, whose San Diego Port District proposal for an airport playground suggesting broken aircraft bits was rejected here years ago. And his piece at the border fence remains unfinished — or unstated — maybe because the fence itself, extending insanely into the surf, is simply too monstrous to be captured by a bit of art.

So any impact that inSITE97 wields is likely to happen in the hearts and minds of those who seek out the work, already prepared to be impressed.

As might be expected, irony hangs thick around the projects, some of it sagging into sarcasm. Conceptual art always runs the risk of looking ridiculous or boring, and irony is a potent defense.

When the community rejects a piece, either by vandalizing it or, worse yet, ignoring it, the artist then can shrug and say, "Ah, well, that was the *point* of the piece." (Presumably the artist's fee already has been paid.)

That is not to suggest that the present enterprise is an exercise in cynicism. There also is represented idealism, naiveté, earnestness, showmanship, passion, dogma, sloth, mischief and opportunism.

With few exceptions, though, there isn't *enough* of anything.

Recurring themes include the border (naturally), the contrast between rich and poor (obviously) and the uses of technology.

Transportation, especially by car, is a popular metaphor. There are many films and videos — a tour involves constantly entering darkened rooms — and a general indifference to craftsmanship.

The very best pieces invite a "Wow!" The majority are more in the "hmmmm" category.

The most potent "Wow!" by far is the

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JERRY RIFE / Union-Tribune

Rowing in Eden: *This installation by Deborah Small is one of numerous works scattered throughout San Diego and Tijuana as part of inSITE97.*

Critic

Pyramid provides one of the few 'Wows!'

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Plexiglas pyramid of the brothers De la Torre — Jamex and Einar — that in itself is worth an entire trip to Tijuana's Centro Cultural.

Their giant piece is a triumph of exuberance, splendidly conceived and crafted, slyly humorous, rigorously honest and endlessly fascinating. Surrounded by puddles of mirrors, it soars a couple of stories to a winking cherub in a heart-enclosed swing and features flames made of broken glass, realistic arms holding broken bottles like torches, a cake-decorator frieze dotted with grinning pre-Columbian faces and blue plush split portals revealing a black-lit interior of jolly, hanging baby dolls.

As one awe-struck Mexican artist noted, "It's indecipherable. It's Mexico."

Two other exhibits in the Centro Cultural reward contemplation. Allan Sekula's ironic photographs include a haunting color snapshot of "Lobbyist's Son at Republican Convention, San Diego," a cold-eyed yuppie with expensive hair, displaying poolside the elephant tattooed on his right breast. And Kim Adams' goofy two-directional bicycles, with elaborate home trailer, are a

comedy highlight.

Out in Colonia Libertad, next to the border fence (irony again!) is Betsabeé Romero's "Jute Car," a 1955 Ford Crown Victoria that she covered in hemp, painted with a luxurious floral theme and drove from Mexico City to the Tijuana dirt pile where it rests like a spent rocket.

And not so far away is the little house rented by Patricia Patterson and turned, with a detailed interior paint-job of orange, yellow, light turquoise, celery green, magenta, pale blue and bubble-gum purple, into a most welcoming neighbor.

On this side of the border, the main "Wow!" is in Barrio Logan, where Rubén Ortiz Torres' unbelievable low-rider "Alien Toy (Unidentified Cruising Object)" is on display with a video showing the astonishing hydraulic dances that various parts of the vehicle can do.

There's also a phony "San Diego Information" shop at 958 Fifth Ave. wherein Melanie Smith has placed such artifacts as solid plastic drinks and postcards of *not quite* the usual design. Meanwhile, at the genuine International Information Center, 170 Sixth Ave., Thomas Glassford's rollicking James Bondesque video — about the wit and quality of a good senior project at a bad film school — can be occasionally seen scattered into the multiscreen visions of local attractions.

There are a couple of pieces displayed on unused theater marquees — that "Molar Dick" sign on the

Balboa Theatre introduces the squirmish dental fantasy of Daniela Rossell — and display windows, including the offensive row of large color photographs outside the Children's Museum.

Why offensive? Because the photographs, of Tijuana residents from the many states of Mexico, are by Eduardo Zepeda but the name on the "piece" is Rosângela Rennó, whose contribution seems to have been writing the grant application. Zepeda's work isn't art until Rennó blesses it? Hard to swallow.

There are plenty of other pieces hidden here and there around town, with concentrations in the Santa Fe Depot and the ReinCarnation Building. Iran do Espírito Santo's large concrete dice and Liz Magor's slowly developing ultraviolet photos of high-schoolers seem to be scattered everywhere. Tours are available but pathfinding is more fun.

I just wish the ideas were more complex, the execution more expert and the concepts more grand.

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