

# Street-side projects confuse, just as the artists planned

By Robert L. Pincus  
ART CRITIC

**M**ake a stop at 968 Fifth Ave., downtown, and you'll find a mock information center about San Diego. The postcards on its swivel racks don't look glamorous or slickly composed and the storefront showcases a curiously displayed mannikin wearing a Sydney, Australia, T-shirt.

Down the block, at Master Tattoo Studio, 944 Fifth Ave., there's a vending machine with unconventional plastic toys: a satanic baby, or a flimsy little transmission station accompanied by a sheet of world-weary, cryptic remarks. No coin required for purchase. Just ask the person at the counter for a token.

If you didn't notice the markers for inSITE97 — the 50-artist exhibition now open across San Diego and Tijuana — you might not know these were

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## ART REVIEW

**"inSITE97," an exhibition featuring 50 artists at 24 sites throughout San Diego and Tijuana**

*Through Nov. 30. (619) 544-1482.*

artists' projects at all. Melanie Smith's center may seem offbeat; Edouardo Abaroa's toys a touch strange — for vending machine toys. But it's likely that the artists (both from Mexico City) wouldn't mind at all if you don't think about their projects as art. They want their creations to be confused with everyday places and things.

Temporary public art is on the streets of San Diego because of inSITE97. Either that or it's just off the street, as with Abaroa's and Smith's projects. And these are some of the best works that the epic-sized exhibition has to offer.

In and around downtown, there may be nothing as spectacular as inSITE94's immense table and chairs

("Under the Table") by sculptor Robert Therrien, seen at the Santa Fe Depot, or as visually stunning as Yukinori Yanagi's flags of the world in sand that doubled as ant farms ("America"), at the Museum of Contemporary Art across the street. But some projects blend with the rest of life in downtown San Diego better than works from three years ago. And that's an aspiration fulfilled for inSITE97 co-directors Michael Krichman and Carmen Cuenca.

The street-side art wants to reach the person who just happens on it as much as the devoted viewer who seeks it out. And this month and next, you're likely to encounter a smattering of these works, if you're downtown. (Works in the Santa Fe Depot, Barrio Logan, at the border, in Tijuana and a smattering of other locales will be subjects of subsequent reviews.)

A genuinely funny video about the region, Thomas Glassford's "City of Greens," mixes right in

with the promotional films on the many screens of the International Information Center at 170 Sixth Ave. This artist from Mexico City obviously understands our collective belief in Southern California/Baja California as a recreational paradise. His witty take on the subject blends seamlessly with the other videos. (It's also a madcap sendup of a spy flick.)

Daniela Rossell, from Mexico City, too, has taken over the outside of the Balboa Theatre at 868 Fourth Ave. The pun on the marquee is goofy: Coming Soon Molar Dick. (It was an idea for an offshore sculpture that couldn't be realized.) But her drawings in its display windows create a fine tension between their elegant technique and the cartoonish content.

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Another shuttered downtown landmark, the Casino Theatre at 653 Fifth Ave., has its marquee temporarily decorated by Canadian Rebecca Belmore. She has installed portraits, angled sideways, of the same woman. Belmore's portraits are straightforward, unpretentious. The subject looks Indian and she surely is, since Belmore, an Ashinabe, has focused on indigenous North Americans in her art. The project, "Awasinake (On the Other Side)" is cryptic and perhaps that is by intent. But its hermetic demeanor, in a public place, would seem self-defeating.

In the windows of The Paladion (777 Market St.) and the portion of the Children's Museum/Museo de los Niños at Market and Front streets, there are big, bright portraits: of immigrants to Tijuana from all of the Mexican states. This project is by Rosângela Rennó, who resides in Rio de Janeiro. It's aptly and punningly dubbed "United States."

But Rennó is a conceptual artist who borrows photographs and text in much of her work. And that's the case here. The man she asked to take the pictures, for "United States," is Edouardo Zepeda, a Tijuana-based photographer of weddings and other special occasions.

As a concept, commissioning work is old hat. John Baldessari, now a world-renowned conceptual artist, did the same with sign painters 30 years ago, when he was living in National City. But the lack of style in his text canvases by sign painters went along with their anonymity. And while Rennó has given ample credit to Zepeda in inSITE97 literature, there's something disingenuous about these claims of collaboration. This is still *her* project; Zepeda was simply her guide to Ti-



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juana culture and the means to her pictorial ends.

You will find several works in more conventional surroundings. They're in the Children's Museum itself (200 W. Island Ave.) and in the ReinCarnation Project Building (1081 J St.).

Ironically, the best of these works don't try to make specific reference to their sites. Fernando Arias, who lives and works in Bogotá, Colombia, looks at the border in his room-sized creation at the ReinCarnation Project, turning his large rendition of the fence itself into a guillotine. Its room-length blade is turned downward, as if it could descend at any moment. At the exact point where it might hit the floor is a line of white powder which fills in for cocaine.

As Arias aptly writes of the border, the fence and this work of art in the "Guide" to inSITE97: "It is about power: of dependency and separation." He's come up with a searing sculptural image to match his words.

Brazilian Miguel Rio Branco, who specializes in photo-based installations, has transformed a room at the ReinCarnation Project into a compelling kind of poetic theater. "Between the Eyes, the Desert" is a fluid sequence of pictures, mixing eyes, faces and arid landscape, accompanied by brooding music that includes Debussy's nocturnes.

At the Children's Museum, there's nothing to match the extravagant whimsy and obsessive power of Chris Burden's "Tale of Two Cities," seen there in '94. The best of the four installations is Quisqueya Henríquez's untitled room full of little structures in wood, paper and pencil. They're arranged in a grid, with a room of their own. The constructions are crosses — complete and fragmented — on

poles. Though they are abstract, this group of works clearly has religious and social implications. You can read as much or as little into them as you want but, first and foremost, they're a lovely sight.

Two installations exemplify what can go wrong with exhibitions like inSITE97. Helen Escobedo of Mexico City, who created an evocative work for inSITE94, falls flat at the ReinCarnation Building. Working with three collaborators (Alberto Čaro-Limón, Armando Lavat and Franco Méndez Calvillo) she uses the fact that the building was once a milk processing plant as the basis for "Milk at the L'ubre Mooseum."

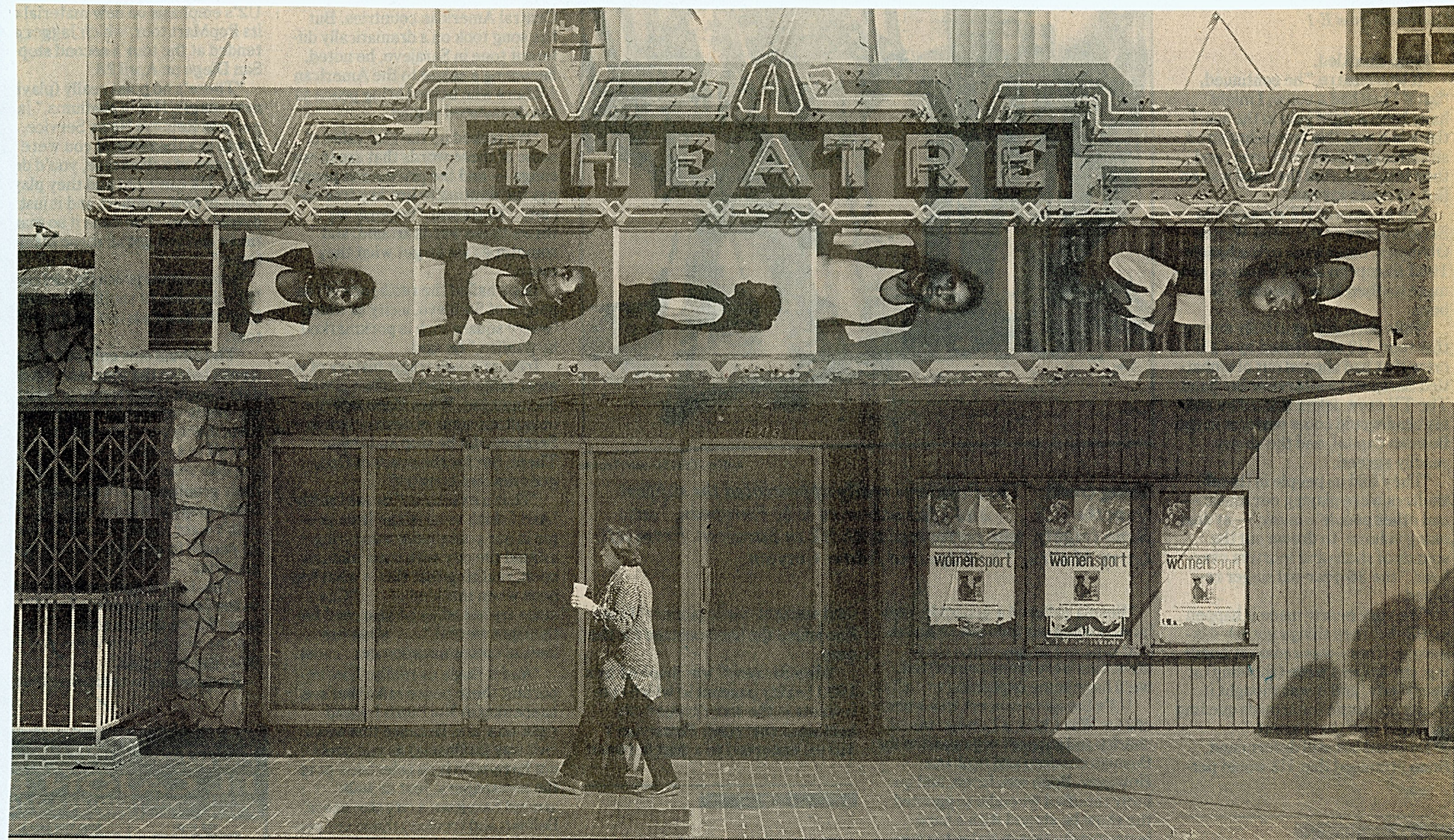
The project is supposed to be funny. But its rooms, complete with a gigantic sculpture of a cow and text, seem like a lot of effort devoted to a small idea: that the way we produce milk has removed us from nature. If she's advocating a return to organic milk, I'll be the first to decline her offer.

At the Children's Museum, there is the intriguing but flawed "There Could Be Many More Than These." The artist is Brazilian Anna Maria Maiolino and her labor-intensive endeavor is vivid in concept, but not much to look at. She creates over and over again the same shape in clay, a looping cylinder, as if to say obsessive effort is part of the creative process. So far, so good. But obsessiveness, or a representation of it, doesn't necessarily yield convincing results. And here, it doesn't.

At the ReinCarnation Project, the Children's Museum and institutional venues in Tijuana, there are photographs by Liz Magor. They are portraits of high school seniors in both Tijuana and San Diego, hundreds of them, taken this past spring. Right now, you can barely discern the faces within them. That's because they're becoming clearer with each passing day, as they are exposed to light. So, it's hard to say much about them, except they're installed as a kind of connective motif throughout the sites of inSITE97. We'll have to see what develops.

Oh, and if you visit all five of Aba-roa's vending machines, you'll have walked the shape of a pentagram. Hard to believe he's trying to put a hex on us, though, when his toys are so much strange fun. But sorcery works in mysterious ways.





JERRY RIFE / Union-Tribune

**Above the street:** Portraits of a woman are displayed on the marquee of the shuttered Casino Theatre in Rebecca Belmore's "Awasinake (On the Other Side)."