

THE ARTS

In Perspective

ROBERT L. PINCUS

There is water falling on the roof of "Cora's Rain House/Casa de Lluvia de Cora." But it's not emanating from the sky.

This colorfully painted house with a corrugated roof may look as permanent as any other architecture, but it has a roof high above its roof. It stands inside the Children's Museum/Museo de los Niños; the water descends from sprinklers directly above the new structure.

Lots of artists call their work a labor of love, and Ernest Silva says the same of his rain house. But Silva — painter and longtime professor at the University of California San Diego — isn't thinking so much of his love of art as his love for his late wife, Cora Boyd Silva, who died in January 1994, at 53, after a long struggle with breast cancer.

"Cora's presence manifested itself in the making of this piece — her emphasis on storytelling, as a writer and a painter," he says. "This ability made her work sing. It was a way of crystallizing things.

"One of the things that was special about Cora was her ability to talk about everyday things. Within the context of the museum, I wanted to provide a domestic, everyday setting as a way of saying that culture is personal. It isn't institutional."

The setting does seem unusually intimate for an installation. The room is cozy; the sound of water falling, comforting. The furniture, like the exterior of "Cora's Rain House," is cheerful. Silva emphasizes primary colors, as in many of his paintings.

Words adorn the table, benches and chairs, in the manner of a chant. "House room boat family" says one bench. And, as on the other furnishings Silva has designed, the words are painted in Spanish as well as English.

Museum director Robert Sain initiated the project with a call to Silva in December 1993. In short

order, the artist conceived of two permanent structures: one at Children's Museum and another at the Casa de la Cultura in Tijuana.

They would be places for children to draw, write and express themselves in other ways. In turn, they would be exhibition spaces, where the art from one city's children could be shared with youngsters from the other metropolises.

"I wanted to evoke the joy of sitting around a family table, sharing stories by creating a place that would generate stories," Silva muses.

He likens it to a stage set for this kind of pleasurable activity.

For in SITE94, the binational festival of shows and site-specific projects that took place last fall across San Diego and Tijuana, Silva constructed temporary "houses" for both the Children's Museum and the Casa de la Cultura. The one at the Children's Museum had live birds; it may again, Silva says, though plans for that aren't concrete.

Birds often have appeared in Silva's paintings and are a central symbol of "Cora's Rain House," too. Incribed on the outside of the house, painted in a bright pattern of crisscrossing lines, is the phrase "bird that sings beautifully/pajaro que canta bellamente."

Large, painted banners on a nearby wall describe Silva's proposal for the project. And they contain this poetic thought: "a bird in Tijuana singing to a bird in San Diego singing to a bird in Tijuana singing to a bird in San Diego . . ."

It's not a big leap to see that Silva's thoughts about birds apply to children, too. His rain houses are the places where they can "sing" to others.

Already, there is art on the walls, derived from workshops that Alberto Caro has conducted in Tijuana. Some paintings picture houses, bright structures with sun shining on them. Others feature the fence, though attitudes toward it vary. In one, rows of autos are crossing to the United States. In another, a figure runs along the fence as a helicopter tries to hunt him down.

Caro plans to combine these images of the border with others done at a June workshop in San Ysidro to make a collage mural, to be installed at the Casa Familia in San Ysidro.

The rain house for Tijuana, still housed at the Casa de la Cultura, will be altered for portability. It will be used at future workshops around town that will generate art and stories.

Silva, for his part, simply hopes his rain houses will be "generative." "What other people bring to it is what will make it sing," he says.

Verities of Jerusalem

Before Arthur Ollman became a highly regarded museum director, he was a photographer widely known for his color night scenes. And for two weeks, beginning April 24, he left behind the Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park to go to Jerusalem.

The reason: an invitation to make work for an exhibition and book coordinated by the Jerusalem School of Photography.

The show, scheduled for 1996,

See Pincus on Page D-6