

inSITE,



OUTTA SIGHT



Rosángela Rennó and Eduardo Zepeda, top, see Tijuana as the United States of Mexico. Deborah Small, above, has packed rooms with herbs, flowers and baskets of apples for a video projection about persecution of women as witches. "Alien

Toy UCO (Unidentified Cruising Object)" features a music video by Rubén Ortiz Torres and low-rider car built by Chava Muñoz.

Photos by GINA FERAZZI / Los Angeles Times

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
TIMES ART CRITIC

SAN DIEGO—For the show inSITE97, the binational display of new art commissioned for public spaces that opened last weekend in the enmeshed border cities of San Diego and Tijuana, Eduardo Abaroa has made little souvenirs for visitors. Dispensed in plastic bubbles from gum ball machines, the assorted prizes are meant to be collected and used—in a private satanic ritual you can perform at home.

Materially, Abaroa's works are trifles. Conceptually, they pack heat.

To get all his souvenirs, you must search out five gum ball machines in five locations around downtown San Diego. In a cheeky, miniature version of a tour of the various sites where the art for inSITE97 is installed, you're here forced to follow the wicked path of a pentagram.

With insolent wit, Abaroa's devilish little prizes handily demolish one dominant edifice of public discourse about art today. The political demand for a culture of virtue, which is self-righteously trumpeted from both the right and the left, is given a loud and resounding raspberry.

Abaroa is 29 and works in Mexico City. Deborah Small, 20 years his senior and an artist in San Diego, has produced an installation totally different in style and tone but oddly related in its rambunctious refusal of debilitating artistic claims of virtuosity.

Small has packed the baggage rooms at the Santa Fe depot, floor to ceiling, with hundreds of fragrant bunches of drying herbs and flowers and baskets of fresh-picked apples. It's the pungent setting for a fascinating digital-video projection that meditates on the historical persecution of

ART REVIEW

Artists in two border cities blast away at artificial barriers in a compelling show of talent come of age.

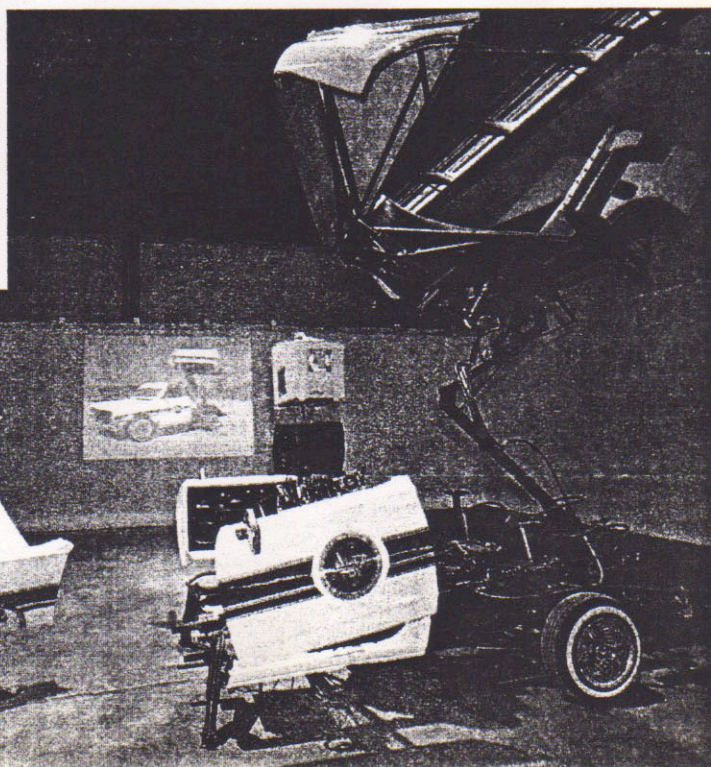
women as witches.

The distinctly different works by Abaroa and Small suggest the diversity of approaches taken by the 43 artists and artist teams invited to participate in inSITE97. Equally important, though, these two artists' razor-sharp dismissals of a deeply entrenched art world shibboleth suggest the degree to which the triennial event, now in its third installment, has come of age.

Of the 36 works I saw, nearly half were compelling and well worth the trek. For the difficult genre of commissioned installation art, the ratio of success is high. (Pieces by Vito Acconci, David Avalos, Rebecca Belmore, Christina Fernandez and Marcos Ramirez weren't ready for the opening; Doug Ischar's enigmatic video installation, which transported visitors inside a pair of gym shorts, a shirt pocket, a shoe box and a locker, was on view only at a neighborhood gymnasium during the opening weekend.)

Indeed, there's more interesting new art in inSITE97 than in all of Documenta X, the sorry spectacle of academic flatulence boring visitors silly in Kassel, Germany. The binational also

Please see ART, F16



ART: inSITE97 Lowers Barriers at Border

Continued from F1

gives the Sculpture Project in Münster a good run for its money—not least because here several younger or lesser-known artists have risen wonderfully to the occasion.

The inSITE series grew out of border art activities generated by a variety of area artists in the 1980s, art that brought the region its first sustained notoriety on a larger-than-local scale.

The powerful, complex reality of the border is inevitably addressed by numerous artists, often in highly theatrical terms and sometimes to provocative effect.

In Fernando Arias' glamorous "The Line," a long section of rusty border fence is suspended from a dank basement ceiling, where it metamorphoses into a gleaming stainless steel guillotine that hangs, like a razor blade, above a 25-foot line of clean white powder, laid out on an icy strip of glass.

Nearby, Miguel Rio Branco has made an audio-visual poem of romantic loss, in which a slowly changing triptych of projected slides is intensely inward and personal while publicly evoking enforced separation.

Judith Barry's jazzy video projection, "Consigned to Border," is shown on a five-sided, T-shaped screen, its flashy public relations-style promotional imagery of the two cities made uncomfortable, even vaguely ominous, by a grating musical score.

In "International Waters," Louis Hock cut a small hole in the border fence to let visitors on each side see one another drink from opposite ends of a single bifurcated water fountain, fed by a deep underground well.

Across storefront windows in downtown San Diego, Rosángela Renno is showing big portrait photographs, shot by Eduardo Zepeda, that depict Tijuana residents who moved there from every state

in Mexico. A cab driver from Querétaro, a gangbanger from Guajuato, a market clerk from Morelos, a drag queen from Jalisco: Tijuana is the United States of Mexico.

Perhaps most cleverly, Francis Alýs conjures the border by default: He recorded his trip around the Pacific Rim to get from Tijuana to San Diego without ever having to cross the border.

The border is not the only subject worth tackling, though, and inSITE97 isn't hamstrung by any curatorially imposed theme. Still, it's curious that so few L.A.-based artists were invited (just three—Fernandez, Rubén Ortiz Torres and Allan Sekula), suggesting that a tall psychological border fence does slice through Southern California's cultural life.

Co-organized by Installation, a San Diego nonprofit organization, and Mexico's National Council for Culture and the Arts, the show is also considerably smaller (half as many artists) and more tightly focused geographically than its predecessors. These changes are salutary. Size is no guarantee of significance, while inSITE97 is big enough to satisfy without becoming grueling.

One knockout work is "Alien Toy UCO (Unidentified Cruising Object)," which features a dazzling music video by Ortiz Torres. The video stars an amazing, exploding, bust-apart car—built by world champion low-rider Chava Muñoz—that the artist also employs as a pedestal for his video projector. Artistic borders between high and low gleefully evaporate.

As serendipitous counterpoint, Betsabée Romero has radically feminized the classic boy toy, gilding the chrome on a 1955 Ford, painting its canvas-covered exterior in a lush floral pattern worthy of an offering to the Virgin

of Guadalupe and filling its interior with layers of dried roses. The car is parked, nose down, atop a steep hill in Colonia Libertad, where it appears to have miraculously jumped the nearby border fence.

Making public a private space, Patricia Patterson has rented three adjoining rooms in a small Tijuana house and, using little more than paint, cobblestones and extraordinary care, has transformed the space into a live-in painting. Breathtakingly beautiful, the work is a secular consecration of domestic life.

Going the other direction, Gary Simmons turns a public place into a space of private reverie, employing an unexpected device that recalls his well-known erasure drawings. Simmons hired a sky-writing airplane to draw simple stars or snowflakes in the air, images that disintegrate in the breeze. At the train depot, a video of the event is projected on a screen printed with a departure schedule, its romantic imagery of Industrial Age travel mingling with the evaporating drawings.

inSITE97 is divided equally between the two cities, but as it happens, most of the compelling works this time are in San Diego (the chief exceptions are those by Hock, Patterson and Romero). An unfinished sculpture by Ramirez, though, was going up at the traffic-clogged border crossing as I left Tijuana, and it promises a certain snap. He's erecting a huge, hollow, wooden Trojan horse—only this one has two heads.

■ inSITE97 guidebooks can be purchased at the Children's Museum/Museo de los Niños, 200 W. Island Ave., San Diego; or the Centro Cultural, Paseo de los Héroes y Mina, Zona Rio, Tijuana. Through Nov. 30; closed Mondays. Information: (619) 544-1482.