

Sculpture Made to Border

Art: A site-specific exhibition in America and Mexico has a sweet tooth, and some real teeth

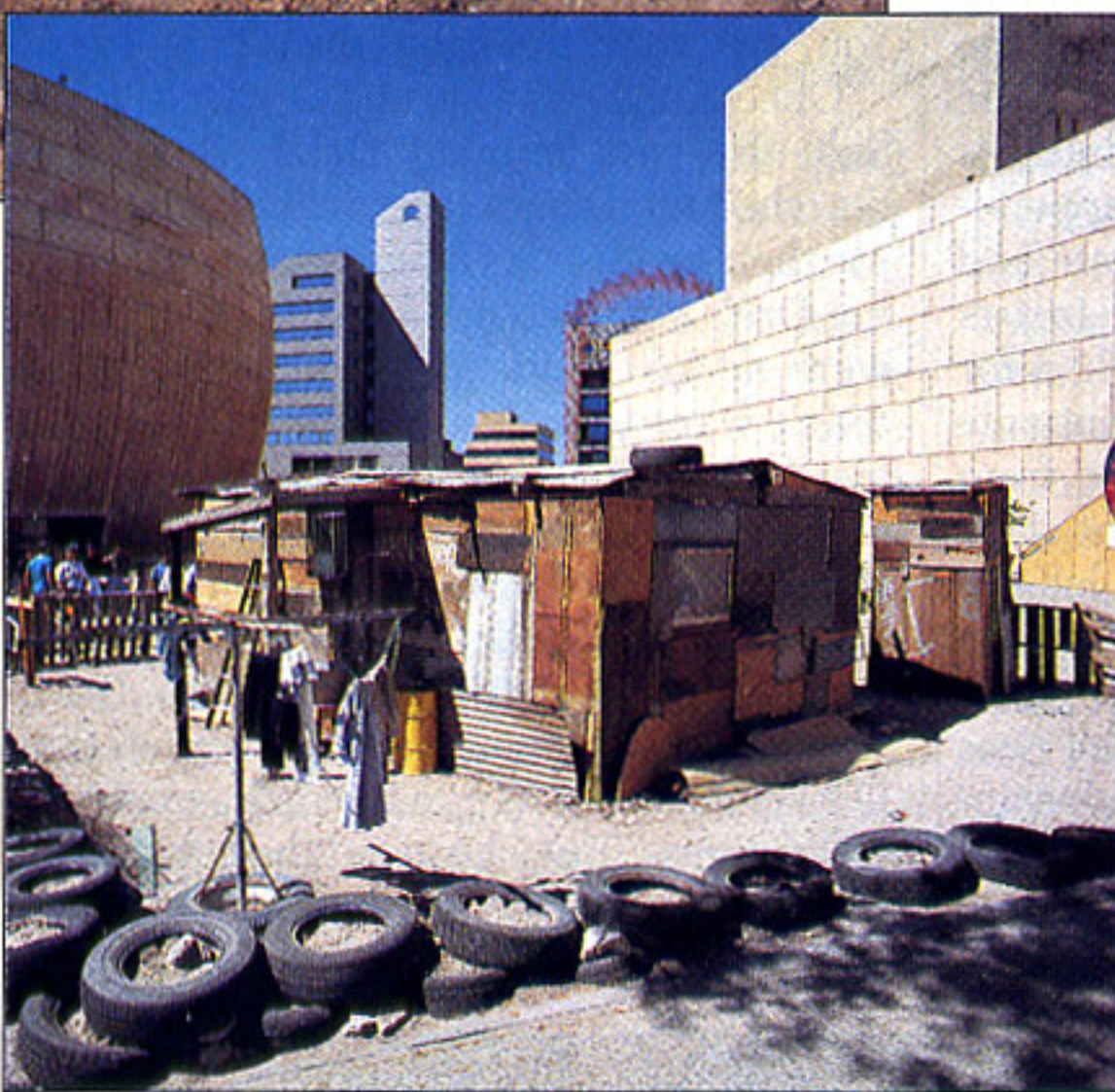


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To the barricades: Escobedo's ominous catapult sculpture 'By the Night Tide' (above), Ramírez's accusatory shanty, 'Century 21'

THE COMEDIAN ROBERT KLEIN HAD A bit about a field trip to Ellis Island he took as a grade-schooler. The teacher promised they'd meet "children from many lands." That overaspirated word conveys the earnest benevolence endemic to site-specific sculpture exhibitions. (Those are shows where artists who can make temporary works out of cheap materials, in a hurry, are invited to participate.) When the exhibition is called "inSITE94," straddles the boundary with Mexico and explores "a vast range of issues related to the border—immigration, race, national and cultural identity—as well as more personal concerns," you almost expect a seminar on aligning your chakras. But several thorny pieces among the 74 works at locations in greater San Diego and Tijuana give this show some tooth.

Stateside, the best-credentialed artists get the best spaces—the clean, protected and track-lighted galleries of the downtown Museum of Contemporary Art—in which



to custom-build their works. Nancy Rubins, a UCLA sculpture professor, seemingly breaches the museum walls with "Airplane Parts and Building, A Large Growth for San Diego." The giant mélange of aviation scrap starts on the floor inside and ends as a big bouquet outside. Carlos Aguirre's "Not for Political Reasons II" is a hanging funerary boat, flanked by sandbags and human bones. The artist's explanation, posted on a wall, contains the current nice-nice words "discourse," "vessel" and "environmental."

Aguirre's cosmic correctness is a little heavy-handed, but the sculpture itself is an elegant piece that deserves the whole gallery it occupies.

Although the exhibition's Mexico segment has some of the better works, it's a good bet few people will see them all. You face a nerve-racking cab ride between, for instance, Allan Kaprow's hilarious "Muezzin" (a blasting-off minaret at the Centro Escolar Agua Caliente) and Helen Escobedo's mock-catapult sculptures in Playas de Tijuana. Kaprow's fog machines, placed at the base of the minaret, might be an insult if the tower had been used for prayer. But it was only an adornment for a 1920s gambling palace (now in ruins) said to have been partly owned by Lucky Luciano. Escobedo's "By the Night Tide"—three metal mesh boats with throwing arms—is more ominous. It sits on the sand near where the U.S. government's 12-foot-high barricade (made mostly from surplus gulf-war steel landing mats, tilted on edge) slides into the sea.

Yo acuso: The punchiest work in either country is Marcos Ramírez's supremely sarcastic "Century 21," plunked down on a dirt carpet in the plaza of Tijuana's Centro Cultural. It's a full-size, working replica of a one-room shanty you can see by the thousands in the Tijuana hills. Ramírez also displays building permits and architect's plans, with

every ad hoc cardboard patch carefully drawn. Situated between a modern museum and a big cinedome, "Century 21" practically cries out, *Yo acuso*.

"inSITE94" suffers from some of the chronic fuzziness that plagues site-specific gatherings. Many artists exercise more multicultural sentiment than esthetic judgment. Huggy messages like the one on the label for Mildred Howard's old cotton cart in the Santa Fe Depot ("Knowing that we made the journey we can better understand why we are here") make you long for a dose of the nihilism that once gave art on the cutting edge a . . . well, cutting edge. Although

"inSITE94" is less saccharine than many shows of its kind, what do you do with a piece like "Car Park," which inexplicably required *three* artists (Nina Katchadourian, Steven Matheson and Mark Tribe) to concoct? "Parking attendants will direct arriving cars into lots [at Southwestern College in Chula Vista] according to car color," says the show's handy guidebook. "This project will demonstrate that parking can be cooperative rather than competitive." Sounds like teacher lecturing children from many lands. PETER PLAGENS