Mixed Media

Why is the desert lovely to see? Because the desert is hiding a well.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince

bout five years ago, I wrote a review of a show celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Smokey the Bear. The Smokey exhibition was an instance of what Suzi Gablik calls the reenchantment of art. This reenchantment, as I saw it, was a function of the interplay between someone I referred to as the "tiny art lover" and Smokey art and memorabilia.

One of the best things about the Smokey show was the highly social environment it fostered. The children in attendance, and especially my tiny art lover, reveled in the literal "interaction" the installation unwitting fostered. None could resist hanging and swinging from displays or playing hide-and-seek. All were thrilled by the sounds of their own little shoes slapping against the museum's shiny wood floors. By their actions, these youngsters effectively transformed the exhibition into a series of sensual and direct contacts with individual works of art.

Now five years later in Los Angeles, LACMALab takes Smokey's fire and fans it with *Made in California: NOW*, an interactive exhibition consisting of eleven original installations by California artists. These real works of art are extraordinary because they encourage understanding rooted in sensual engagement—like the Smokey show did—and speak the language of children. Remember, it wasn't all that long ago that putting objects in their mouths was their primary method for learning about the world around them.

Happily, *Made in California*: *NOW* doesn't tell children what to do and how to do it. Which is wise because no curator could predict what a child might make of a coffee can lid, much less a work of art. The adult in all of us begs for an order the museum has historically been happy to fabricate. This need for order, however, is utterly foreign to a child. Situated off-site of LACMA proper and designed specifically for children, the show is not compelled to create a grand production. From a dearth of walls to intentionally placed geometric "windows" in the existing walls, from abandonment of institutional lighting effects to a purposefully ambiguous viewing order and a preponderance of noise, the traditional approach to art is deemed inconsequential, even ridiculous. It is as if the museum had a good laugh at itself, and decided at least temporarily to suspend pretension and opt for a more down to earth approach to exhibition.

With hardly a label to be found and no predetermined viewing order, the artworks disdain participation in some grand meta-narrative. Instead of complex meanings there are a multiplicity of experiences to be had. The show is surprisingly enjoyable for kids primarily because nobody, not the museum educator, not the voice of art history, and not even the museum guard cuts in on their good time. This may be a first for art education. The museum has recognized that didactic panels and narrators with British accents are not where it's at for kids ... maybe not even for adults. As the mother of two tiny art lovers, I am secretly thrilled that my sons flounced, fussed and stubbornly continued kicking the balls in Victor Estrada's Reflections on Poetry when I declared it was time to go.

The museum's presentation of individual artworks employs the element of play as an organizational theme. But this theme is also developed in individual installations by artists whose work has historically advanced the "mind-bending value of imaginative play." The most successful pieces work less as self-contained objects than as starting points for something beyond them. There was a line to get into Allan Kaprow and his 11-year-old son Bram Crane-Kaprow's No Rules Except. Watching a group of children climb and jump from ladders in the pillow-filled enclosure, punch the punching bags, swing on ropes, bump into one another and the pillow-covered walls, and fight with pillows, it dawned on me that this piece and its direct interaction function reflexively.

From outside No Rules Except I realized that I wasn't merely watching a band of hoodlums rage out of control. I was witnessing art from within: as a safe environment for exploring the most basic human impulses. For forming and working out simple human and spatial relationships. And for uttering elemental truths. The kids had a great time; one child wrote that this was "da bomb." Numerous parents wished they had one at home. I wished the same thing, but even more, was grateful for this powerful metaphor for art and the clarity it provided. A central tenet of this exhibition, clarity is here described as contingent upon the "presence and interest of the museum visitor." Whether inside or outside the cage, clarity came from participation in

Draza Frato O'Brien

the pillow installation.

Similarly, in Jacob Hashimoto's Watertable, which is composed of undulating, green artificial turf covered hillocks, children literally walk into, slide up and down, nestle between the landscape of art. Whereas art has always been about sensation, LACMA has now embraced the importance of children rolling about in the grass. While landscape is exposed as a site of tactile exploration, it is also rendered transparent. Little portholes dot the surface of Hashimoto's rolling green hills, inviting the viewer to peek at the wonders contained within. To get at the invisible by penetrating the visible. Hitting on the archetype of the trolls, treasures, and Teletubbies hidden beneath the ground, Hashimoto's portholes equate the magic of childhood with the magic of art. Its ability to make us feel, to move us, to suggest movement while remaining still, to evoke textures and tastes, to be noisy while not uttering a sound.

A component of the exhibition is a behind-the-scenes look at the evolution of the exhibition, its artists, and the development of their works. As a person with a foot in both the adult and the kid world, it was refreshing to have the option of milling over the artifacts of the exhibition's deconstruction or pursuing something more exciting. I liked this intellectual jaunt for the same reason that I like "Sesame Street" and Toy Story—because it operates at multiple levels simultaneously, privileging none of them over another.

My favorite piece in the show is Anything You Can Do, a collaborative work by Jennifer Steinkamp and Jimmy Johnson. Steinkamp has hooked up a set of swings to a computer-animated video projection, complemented by electronic sounds composed by Johnson. One swing controls bands of hot colors, the other cool colors. As pairs of children swing, launching into digital canvas in front of them, they become part of an alternative reality of their own creation. The children revel in the power of movement, of the opportunity to transcend from the ground of their parents into a pool of colored light. A momentary suspension of gravity, the swing piece signifies escape from the systems that traditionally define and structure our world. And our exhibitions.

Though the show sets itself in opposition to traditional art-historical information and the computer by extension, it nonetheless embraces an aspect of computer technology. We tend to forget that long before the computer made virtual realities seamless and almost universally accessible, art embraced the idea of depicting alternative or competing realities. Estrada's outdoor sandbox, which enables children to thrash about inside a painting, to move, kick and toss mass, form and color about in space, participates in this endeavor. This is not unlike the experience of the Japanese photographer in Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams* who literally walks into a van Gogh painting. In the Kurosawa film the man merges with van Gogh's space in much the same way as children get inside Estrada's.

In contrast to the image of the museum exhibition as yet another ivory tower that should not be touched, Made in California: NOW urges children to kick, walk, punch, swing their way into the work of art. Though they might be stereotyped as deliberately destructive little hellions with no sense for art, none of the children I observed on a crowded Saturday afternoon were mashers. All were completely absorbed in the experience of art and each other. Far beyond the promise of what has become clichéd "interaction," the artwork in this show is as deliberately seductive-offering spaces to plunge into and climb up—as Smokey unintentionally was. As a result, the child is not positioned near or parallel to the work of art; he gets inside it, explores it, sees how it works. He plays within the art, and as he becomes part of it, it becomes part of him. What is most revolutionary about this exhibition is that it recognizes that "instruction through closed hierarchical systems that use control and intimidation" shuts down thinking or produces boredom. It focuses instead on the educational value of play. Which means LACMALab doesn't have to stand on its proverbial head to build a program around the art because comprehension and thus appreciation comes from the child's fusion with it.

While we wait for the big people's *Made in California* (with an opening date of October 22) to explore California identity through eight hundred works of art, we can celebrate *Made in California*: *NOW*, the kid version's successful exploration of art's real roots: the sensual experience that precedes, if not eludes, intellectualization. This discovery may ultimately change the way kids—and hopefully adults—think about art. What more could an art education program for children aspire to?



COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Mixed media

SOURCE: Artweek 31 no11 N 2000

WN: 0030604370005

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.

Copyright 1982-2000 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.