

## SURROUNDINGS | ECHO PARK

## An Art Gallery With Car Culture Appeal

Motorists often brake to admire the installations at Sunset Art Park, a donated space.

By BOB POOL  
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This is one gallery where an art exhibit's success is never gauged by the foot traffic it generates.

An exhibition's impact at the Sunset Art Park in Echo Park is measured by automobile traffic it stops.

For nearly eight years a series of provocative art shows at the unusual display space carved into the side of a hill at 1478 Sunset Blvd. has caused brake lights to flash and motorists' heads to turn.

A military tank plows over a thick hedgerow of lush grass growing in an installation called "Turf." A Santa Fe diesel locomotive roars toward the street in a sculpture named "Super Chief." A battered cabin cruiser stands precariously on its nose and seems to teeter over passersby in a piece titled "Boat Drop."

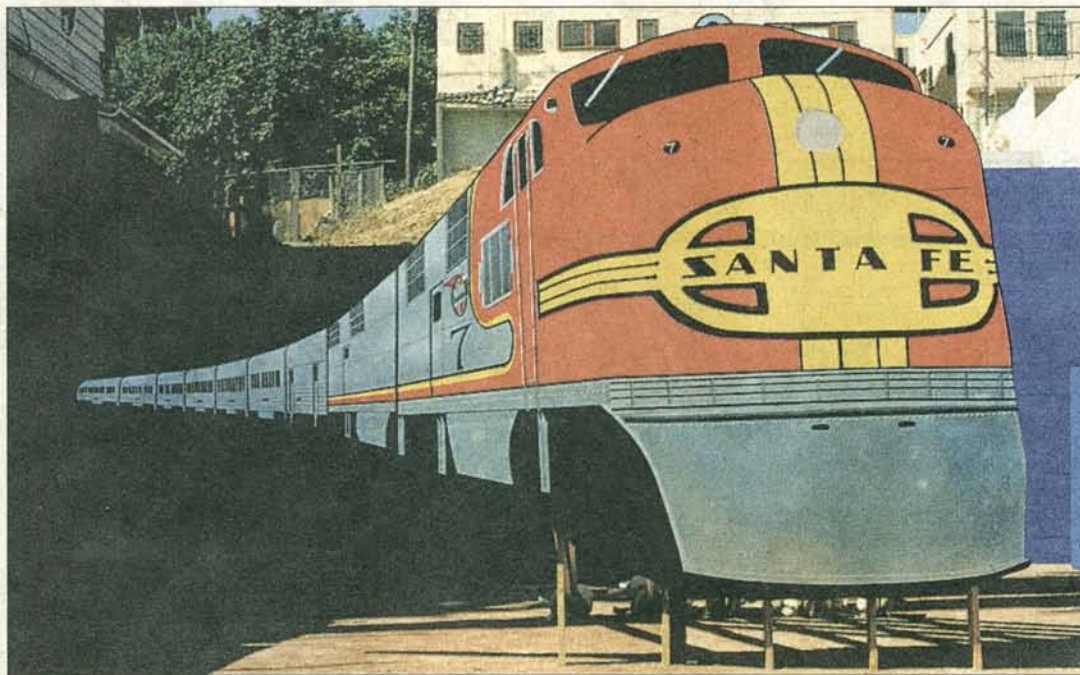
It's "drive-by art," in the words of Ernesto Montano, curator of the outdoor exhibit.

"Artists have to have a special skill to produce a piece that will be noticed by people driving by in their cars. You don't have that many people walking past this place. And the art has to be appropriate: I invite artists to do something that takes into consideration the architecture of Echo Park."

The Art Park is surrounded on three sides by houses. A wrought-iron fence separates it from busy Sunset Boulevard, where a row of low-slung retail businesses stands across the street. A few blocks away is the bustling center of Echo Park, with its food markets, nail salons and clothing stores.

Over the years Montano has staged 14 elaborate exhibitions at the site. Passersby get out of their cars to study the current one: the intricate but graceful "Derricks of the Rancho."

Sculptor and ceramist Peter Shire has created five 20-foot metal towers covered with circles and squares and topped by human-like figures that seem to



**HARD TO MISS:** "Super Chief," part of an exhibit at Sunset Art Park, catches people by surprise.

be balancing uneasily on chairs and ladders. The installation represents Los Angeles.

"It's about oil wells and construction cranes, about safety and precariousness," said Shire — born and raised in Echo Park and considered by some to be the patriarch of the community's thriving art colony. He is the first Echo Park artist to be shown in the Art Park, Montano said.

Shire said the outdoor gallery — with its basement-like walls that frame the sculpture installations — is a piece of art itself.

"It was a development that went amiss and the guy who owned it figured out a really great way to deal with it," Shire said. "That's the essence of creativity."

Property owner Arthur Goldberg, a lawyer and the brother of state Assemblywoman Jackie Goldberg (D-Los Angeles), donated the site for use as a gallery.

Goldberg had planned in the early 1990s to build a new office on the land for his Working People's Law Center. But that project soured — and the unfinished 35-by-60-foot construction site quickly became a trash-strewn magnet for graffiti vandals.

In 1994, leaders of Jovenes Inc., a community-based service center for at-risk youths, tried to convert the abandoned building site into a tree-shaded "peace

park." But vandals immediately stole some of the trees and resumed spray-painting its concrete-block retaining walls.

After that, Montano, Jovenes' art director, set out to turn it into an art park instead. Initially, he tried to stage four exhibitions a year there. When that proved impractical because of the time needed to install and remove sculpture, two annual shows were scheduled.

A variety of local organizations and agencies, including the Los Angeles County Arts Commission and the California Arts Council, help finance the exhibitions.

A typical installation costs about \$6,000. The artist receives \$2,000 of that, Montano said.

There is no shortage of artists eager to be featured in the outdoor gallery.

"Every month we get proposals, but some are really out of hand. One guy wanted to put a house in upside down and cut it open and fill it with homeless people. He talked about his 'high concept,' but I didn't see how we could make that work," Montano said.

The most controversial installation so far has been this year's "Turf" war sculpture, created by artists Kevin Schmitt and Don Nguyen.

"We had started in the con-

flict in Afghanistan. I asked the artists to include Sept. 11. They came out with a tank made of a fabric, kind of a toy tank over a cube of real grass that was irrigated inside," Montano said.

"We started getting mail saying, 'That's just what we need: an army tank in Echo Park, one of the most progressive parts of the city.'"

Sterling Sheehy, a graduate student in animation and visual arts at USC who lives next door to the Art Park, said he appreciates the installations.

"This creates culture," he said, gazing down at the top of Shire's derrick-themed artwork. "Public venues and public works create a community around here."

Architect Greg Swanson agrees. His design office is in Echo Park, and he often stops to view the art installations. He said his only wish is that the outdoor gallery would be unfenced so visitors could inspect the pieces up close.

"It's a beautiful idea, taking a lot like this and bringing something back to the community," Swanson said.

Montano said he hopes to expand the open-air gallery concept elsewhere in the city. He has secured a small display spot in Boyle Heights and is looking for donated spaces in places like



**SOS:** "Boat Drop" attracts drivers' attention along Sunset.



**WHAT DOES IT MEAN?** "Turf" has been controversial.

Hollywood and the Westside.

Even a properly positioned flat wall could be used for two-dimensional installations, he said. "If I can get two more places to replicate this project, then we can have a larger budget and can

better stabilize our expenses."

There's just one requirement, he said — something they've learned to appreciate in Echo Park:

High-concept art deserves to be shown in a high-traffic area.