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Beijing gets a taste of L.A.'s art world in 'The Los Angeles Project'



Visitors to the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing approach a work by Aaron Curry.

By JULIE MAKINEN
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Southern Californians walking into the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing might wonder whether they've stepped through a time-space portal and been beamed back to Burbank or Hollywood.

Painted palm trees soar up the walls of a giant atrium. A large Oscar statuette, the kind that normally shows up along the red carpet on Academy Awards night, stands sentry on another surface. Nearby, there's a life-size rendering of a portable trailer that would shelter a movie star on set between takes, and oh look -- there's a two-dimensional studio-lot golf cart too.

On a recent weekday, L.A. artist Alex Israel was bouncing a bit nervously around the space as a team of Chinese scenic artists applied the finishing touches to his sprawling mural, "Star Waggon."

Israel -- who normally works out of the Warner Bros. studio lot and often riffs on the themes of celebrity culture, entertainment and the Hollywood lifestyle -- is one of seven artists featured in the Ullens Center's "The Los Angeles Project."

The show, which opened Sept. 13 and runs through mid-November in Beijing's 798 Arts District, is billed as the first extensive presentation of L.A. artists in China.

Los Angeles is "kind of at the center of a bunch of different trends," said Ullens Center Director Philip Tinari, who curated the show with Paula Tsai.

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"You have some great forces drawing artists there. You have the schools but you also have actual workable, affordable studio space. And it's hit this critical mass that -- aside from New York -- it's really the only place in the States where you have a major concentration of artists, galleries and increasingly, institutions."

While L.A.'s status as a buzzy, dynamic hotbed of cultural production alone would be enough to justify such a show, Tinari said the project was given extra impetus by some personal connections between L.A. and Ullens Center founders Guy and Myriam Ullens, whose son-in-law Laurent Degryse is on the board of the Museum of Contemporary Art.

After spending time in both cities, Tinari said, they realized that despite popular notions that Los Angeles and Beijing, as "Pacific Rim" metropolises, share strong, specific cultural connections, in fact the relationship is largely imagined, and ties between the two cultural capitals are actually rather weak.



A twist on an iconic scene from "The Graduate" is part of Kathryn Andrews' installation at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing.

"There's actually very little connection, or even mutual awareness, between the art scenes of the two cities, so it just seemed really interesting to kind of short-circuit that and in a way just bring L.A. to Beijing" said Tinari, noting that while a great number of Chinese artists ventured abroad in the last 20 years, New York and Paris were more popular destinations than Los Angeles for both commercial and creative reasons. "L.A. has never really been in the collective imagination of the Chinese art scene in a major way."

In addition to Israel, the show features works by a very diverse group of artists: Kathryn Andrews, Aaron Curry, Matthew Monahan, Sterling Ruby, Ryan Trecartin and Kaari Upson.

Israel's "Star Waggon" is literally representational of L.A. and helps ground visitors in the city's visual landscape -- "I wanted to bring people into the city, to communicate the experience of my workday," he said.

But overall, the idea of "The Los Angeles Project" is not to showcase art that's about L.A.

"There's been a lot of interest in and curiosity among the arts community here about these artists, so to present them directly will satisfy them in some way," said Tinari. Several of the artists have never exhibited in China before. "But for a broader public who's never heard of any of these people, hopefully it will just offer a really interesting set of possibilities about what art is or what it can be."



A group of cylinders featuring Bozo the Clown iconography is part of Kathryn Andrews' installation.

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Few of the works bear obvious SoCal signifiers; instead, the Ullens Center has developed programming to situate the artwork in its urban environs.

For example, the center screened CalArts professor Thom Andersen's documentary "Los Angeles Plays Itself," which chronicles the way movies have represented, or misrepresented, the City of Angels. Andersen and Glenn Phillips, curator of the Getty Museum's 1968-2008 "California Video" exhibition, delivered lectures.

Meanwhile, the seven artists have each contributed to a take-home "art map" of the city produced by L.A.'s For Your Art. In it they recommend their favorite SoCal haunts, and L.A. anthropologist Jim Heimann provides a brief overview of the city's history, ambitions, narrative and neighborhoods.

The map includes a guide to L.A. museums, galleries and other destinations and even which Angelenos to follow on Instagram. The idea is to help Chinese audiences imagine how Los Angeles relates to Beijing -- and encourage them to visit.

Andrews, who is interested in themes of authorship and authenticity particularly in pop culture, said Beijing and L.A. are alike in the sense that they are both sprawling cities known for traffic and even smog.

"But L.A. is even less of a pedestrian town, and it's easy for artists to be almost isolated and develop their own unique voice," said Andrews, whose studio is in Highland Park. "This show is reflective of that --everyone is doing something different."

Andrews' component of the show includes two massive photo murals that use as their departure point the iconic scene from "The Graduate" in which Dustin Hoffman's character gazes at the stockinged leg of Mrs. Robinson. But Andrews had an Asian model stand in for Hoffman and made other subtle changes.

"I wanted to see how I could recreate this scene from 'The Graduate' without getting into a copyright issue," said Andrews, noting that her themes of replication and authenticity dovetail with what she called "China's embrace of the copy."

Her other installations include some conical barrel sculptures covered in modified Bozo the Clown iconography, and a faux "certificate of authenticity" for a shirt Tom Cruise wore in "Mission: Impossible 2."

Sterling Ruby, whose home base is a studio near Olympic Boulevard and Soto Street in downtown Los Angeles, is the member of the show with perhaps the most exposure to China. He's been to the country 12 times and had works produced in Beijing, and some of his pieces have been collected by Guy and Myriam Ullens.

"When I first came to Beijing in 2008, it felt like L.A., it felt wild -- like L.A. did when I came to L.A. 14 years ago," said Ruby as workers maneuvered one of his giant spray-painted canvasses onto a wall and some others checked out one of the massive pieces from his "Monumental Stalagmite" series -- colorful urethane-drip and plywood monoliths stretching several stories high.

Ruby has five different shows happening in Asia almost concurrently -- in Beijing, Korea, Tokyo, Taipei and Hong Kong. China is special, though, he said because "I've never been in a place where the audience is so big. Thousands of people, from children to people in wheelchairs, come through the door when you have an opening."

Tinari said staging shows like the exhibition of Los Angeles artists is increasingly challenging in China these days.

"It's becoming so difficult to show international art in China right now, because the customs policies make it difficult to bring things in -- you have to come up with the money to guarantee the work, because there's the idea that the second you bring them in you're going to sell them and not pay the taxes," he said. "There's kind of these weird cultural protection policies that have gone into effect in the last three or four years that actually incentivize institutions against embarking on projects that promote serious cultural exchange."

So while "The Los Angeles Project" is on one level about L.A., in a broader sense "it's just an interesting way to talk about the world outside of China," said Tinari. "L.A. is as compelling a scene as any in the world right now."