

Still I Rise

Southern California public art in the time of furloughs

HELEN LESSICK



Times are tough in California, where one out of eight adults is unemployed. Not counted are self-employed artists, fabricators, and designers whose practices are underfunded in a contracting economy. Yet innovative public art projects, programs, and initiatives still rise across the state.

Ken Gonzalez-Day was one of 21 artists commissioned to create billboards for *How Many Billboards: Art In Stead*.

Taking It to the Streets

“Southern California” is shorthand for pleasant, year-round climate, stunning landscape, and traffic gridlock. Here, in stereotype, we mindlessly navigate freeways, isolated in our cars. It’s no wonder some of the most innovative SoCal public artworks address the street as public space.

How Many Billboards: Art in Stead was an extensive program of artists’ billboards, bus tours, panels, and lectures in the spring of 2010 organized by the MAK Center for Art and Architecture at the Schindler House in Los Angeles. MAK Director Kimberli Meyer, who says that “art should occupy a visible position in the cacophony of mediated images,” commissioned 21 artists to design billboards for display across the L.A. basin. Most billboards juxtapose desire and need. The best works in Art in Stead explored billboard conventions, questioning underlying messages in commercialized space.

Ken Gonzales-Day examined the beauty standard, contrasting profiles of an antiquarian black marble statue and a dark-complected man. The antithesis of advertising, his project questioned history, culture, and public image.

The Urdu script in Lauren Woods’ billboard was exotic in a landscape of English and Spanish signs. Highlighting cultural dominance, Woods’ work was, for most, unreadable and alienating. Her art required non-Urdu readers to engage Urdu-speakers in order to decipher the content: a bucolic landscape poem.

Lively questioning of public convention is core to many public initiatives. The L.A.-based duo Owen Driggs noticed working sign spinners and freewheelers across the southland. They saw convention-breaking art in the activity of nontraditional athletes who sculpted the shared built environment.

Inspired by this “instrumentalization of the body,” Owen Driggs curated *Performing Public Space Tijuana (PPS Tijuana)*, an 11-artist exhibit of temporary public projects. Entering the Tijuana community in partnership with Mexico’s La Casa del Túnel gallery, Owen Driggs displayed a spectrum of artists harnessing their bodies and social practices as art throughout the border city, tied to an art gallery exhibition.

Public display is well established in Tijuana, as gang enforcers routinely display severed heads on city bridges. *PPS Tijuana* contested this dominance in March 2010 by breaking pedestrian expectations, not municipal laws.

Nancy Popp’s untitled Tijuana piece was one of the most intriguing efforts. Climbing a utility pole near the international border she broke street, age, and gender conventions to obtain new views. Popp spent five minutes about 12 feet above the



sidewalk before police took her away for questioning. She was eventually released, and her public climb was front-page news in local papers; the gallery exhibition was not.

ABOVE: During the *PPS Tijuana* exhibit, pole-climbing Nancy Popp made front page news. BELOW: Fallen Fruit planted 21 fruit trees on the U.S./Mexico border for *PPS Tijuana*.

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Time, Space, and Water

Unexpected use of public space was central to 2010's Glow, Santa Monica's biannual oceanfront arts festival. Drawing on Paris's *Nuit Blanche*, minus the surrealism, Glow activated a section of Pacific beach on September 25, 2010, with 20 commissioned artworks.

Glow is a framework, emphasizing a temporal and communal art experience over repeat views of static work. A civic event co-created by the City of Santa Monica's Cultural Affairs manager Jessica Cusick and artistic director Marc Pally, Glow connected local and international artists, commercial interests, security forces, and funders in a remarkable public-private partnership. Raising millions to commission truly ephemeral works, Glow drew an international audience to its beach nocturne.

Steve Roden's *Coast Lines* was among the most successful efforts. Inspired by Santa Monica's locale, Roden sited two large screens at water's edge. Fluid, hand-drawn images limned the coastline of the eastern Pacific. One screen traced the coast south from the Santa Monica Pier to the tip of South America. The other tracked to the top of North America. Projecting locally and thinking globally, Roden beautifully parsed the connection of time and place and water's edge.

In nearby Culver City, Judy Starkman worked with water and connection. The artist and athlete was inspired by the municipal pool, calling it a "southern California public space with an incredible diversity of swimmers, from former Olympians to handicapped elders." Her *Secret Life of Swimmers* project comprises diptych portraits of strangers in pool attire and street clothing.

Starkman's documentation of a truly local community drew the attention of Christine Byers, Culver City's proactive arts administrator. She is working with Starkman to produce *Secret Life* street banners for summer 2011 as a public art project.

Unlike many municipalities, Culver City is building. Percent-for-art funds accrue from Sony Pictures' constant set construction. Byers's office also works with developers, including the national



chain Westfield Malls. They commissioned three permanent works for the local mall, including David Trubridge's lovely and insouciant *Neptune's Necklace*. In Southern California, even mall walkers get great public art.

House and Home

Shopping or driving, SoCal artists are inspired by public policy and personal impact.

Kim Stringfellow was drawn to the effects of Southern California's 1938 Small Tract Act, which encouraged desert settlement. *Jack Rabbit Homestead*, her artist-initiated project, is a road trip, audio tour, web exhibit, and book documenting the encampment 80 miles from L.A.

In 1947 huge lots were available for low prices in California's remote Wonder Valley. Services and support were equally low. Today many homesteads have only jackrabbits as occupants; few have been repioneered by humans. Stringfellow's tour of abandoned and reoccupied homesteads explores domestic aspirations and failed dreams.



Southern California is a temporary home for many immigrants coming to study. One of the newest images of home will be built high above the University of California–San Diego footpaths. Do Ho Suh’s remedy for student homesickness is *Fallen Star*, a domestic yard surrounding a simple house. Seven stories up and cantilevered over the Engineering Building’s roofline, the house is a precarious monument. Suh balances complex engineering and simple charm in his secluded public art.

Fallen Star is the largest commission to date for the Stuart Collection, the university’s contemporary art entity. This public art program does not leverage a percentage for art; instead, budgets are raised around artists’ specific proposals. Envied for the ability to truly curate a commissioned public art collection, director Mary Beebe and her committee wisely prefer quality over quantity. *Fallen Star*, the eighteenth work in the 30-year-old collection, will break ground when campus closes in summer 2011.

Memory and Memorials

SoCal is often accused of being without memory, erasing buildings, art, and faces with ease. The Los Angeles County Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, however, finds reason to remember and celebrate the Bob Hope Patriotic Hall. Noted muralist Kent Twitchell won the historic opportunity with the County Arts Commission.

Twitchell will honor the legendary Helen Lundeberg by reinterpreting her WPA murals made for the hall. *Free Ballot* and two other 1942 works are lost, known only in documentation. Twitchell is designing tributes to the three lost Lundebergs, calling them “monuments to American cultural heroes.” They will be unveiled in 2012 when the hall, a registered state historic resource, is renovated.

The Los Angeles Unified School District also links public history and public art. The Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools—a K-12 educational complex on the site of the Ambassador Hotel, where Kennedy was assassinated—opened in autumn 2010 with several interior art commissions. Artists

ABOVE: Steve Roden’s *Coast Lines*, a site-specific installation at the Santa Monica pier.
BELOW: Judy Starkman’s *Secret Lives of Swimmers*, which will be on banners in Culver City.



ABOVE: Photo by Bill Short. BELOW: Photos courtesy the artist.



ABOVE: Documentation of Helen Lundeberg's *Free Ballot*, a WPA mural. MIDDLE: Sun and Wyatt's *Inspiration Park*. BELOW: 1972 Hirokazu Kosaka performance at Pomona College.



May Sun and Richard Wyatt chose the public face of the Ambassador Hotel property for their work *Inspiration Park*. A truly public asset of the school district, the park provides quiet space for students and the general public outside the closed campus.

The below-grade treatment unites image, text, and atmosphere under a canopy of sycamores. Encouraging contemplation of Kennedy's legacy, one stone wall holds excerpts from his speeches. Another displays quotes from other champions of social justice. An erect stainless steel plate and blue glass floor reference the glimpse of light hope provides on our darkest nights.

Institutions: The Future of History

Public schools and institutions rarely commission cutting-edge public art. But with visionary partnerships, SoCal museums are making community art on a grand scale within the museum community.

Pacific Standard Time (PST) is the Getty Research Institute's initiative to connect arts institutions across Southern California. This fall, 50 cultural entities will host exhibitions featuring postwar artworks from SoCal, bracketing a 10-day performance and public art festival in January 2012.

Ann Philbin, director of the UCLA Hammer Museum, describes PST as "one big extended museum, with freeways as museum halls." Michael Govan of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art notes the artists' works "continue to inspire, marking L.A. as a truly international city."

Ten years in planning, PST has inspired regional museums to embrace their heritage. *It Happened at Pomona: Art at Pomona College 1969-1973* examines temporary, ephemeral, and performed works in the college town. Documentation shows Hirokazu Kosaka's untitled 1972 performance presaging Matthew Barney and James Luna. Kosaka, the L.A. arts worker and Shigon Buddhist priest, will create a new public performance and sculpture at Getty Center in 2012.

Orange County Museum of Art will mount *State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970*, an exhibit that includes documentation of Chris Burden's pre-punk injury performance, in which he literally took a bullet for art in Santa Ana. This early performance along with body and ecological actions by others in SoCal are the unacknowledged precedents for social practice art. Many vibrant exhibitors working in the 1945 to 1980 time frame of Pacific Standard Time are teaching, curating, and impacting the conversations of contemporary public practice.

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Creative and civic, Southern California's public art and artists find opportunity amid challenges of finances, policies, and resources. Undaunted, we echo Maya Angelou's classic poem:

*"Does my sassiness upset you?...
Does my haughtiness offend you?...
Does my sexiness upset you?...
Still I'll rise."*

HELEN LESSICK is an artist, public art activist, and consultant. Her artworks have been experienced in the United States and Europe. She has managed public art efforts across the country, and consults and writes on civic art issues from Los Angeles.