

Torrance artist finds success at the IX International Biennial of Cuenca requires a different kind of talent

On April 6, San Pedro artist Fran Siegel and Torrance Museum of Art Director Kristina Newhouse boarded a plane at LAX en route to Ecuador to participate in the prestigious IX International Biennial of Cuenca art festival.

It was a trip that followed months of negotiations on the part of Newhouse and intense preparatory work by Siegel.

As recipients of a \$75,000 grant from the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Newhouse and Siegel were going to Ecuador to create three site-specific installations.

The first — a gently flowing wave of interwoven Mylar strips over a mirror-filled reflecting pool — would occupy a colonial-era patio adjacent the city's 450-year-old Cathedral Vieja. The second — a cascade of 530 nickel-wire strands — would spill from the top of an interstitial space Siegel nicknamed "The Slice." The third — a large fluttering banner made from a light reflective material — was to hang between two towers on the Plazoleta de la Cruz del Vado, a small public park on a bluff above the Tomebamba River.

But despite all their preparations, as the saying goes, the best laid plans of mice and men (and artists) often go awry.

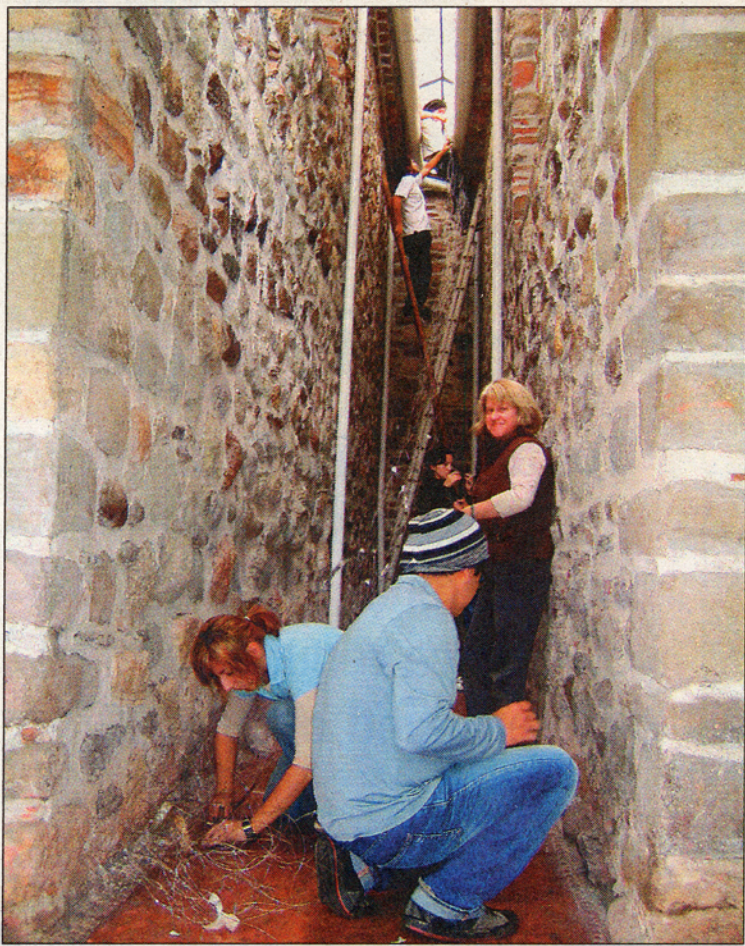
The first unwelcome surprise, said Newhouse, now back home, came on the day the pair arrived in Ecuador.

The good news was that five boxes containing materials and supplies, which had been shipped from San Pedro, were there and had cleared customs without any problem. The bad news? Two long tubes containing all of Siegel's meticulously precut Mylar strips, along with the templates for their installation, were nowhere to be found, lost in the limbo of Ecuadorian customs.

ARTIST SIEGEL/B2

CREATIVE DISTRACTIONS

San Pedro artist Fran Siegel, top, prepares one of her three site-specific installations during a prestigious art festival in Ecuador.



PHOTOS COURTESY FRAN SIEGEL

San Pedro artist Fran Siegel is known for her Mylar-strip work, right, and her site-specific installations. She recently returned from an Ecuador exhibit.

ARTIST SIEGEL

FROM PAGE B1

A week of "begging and pleading," said Newhouse, would pass before the precious tubes were recovered and cleared.

"So," said Siegel, "we had to start with what was supposed to be the second piece." The Slice.

But that didn't go smoothly either.

When Siegel and Newhouse went to the offices of the Biennial to pick up the tall ladders they had requested in order to work in the 20-foot-tall space, all they were offered was a 6-foot step ladder.

And nearly all negotiations were conducted in Spanish, which, fortunately, Newhouse speaks reasonably well, but Siegel doesn't speak at all.

They tried to rent ladders. But that failed. Then someone suggested they borrow one from the local fire station. The firemen said that would be fine. But when they went to pick it up, they were informed, with regret, the ladder was not there — it had been needed to fight a fire.

Finally, a resident American came to their aid, found them ladders and construction began.

"In a way," said Siegel, looking back philosophically, "it turned out for the better because we were able to do problem-solving on the first piece, which was the most complex of all the installations. It wasn't where we'd intended to start, but it turned out OK that way."

Meanwhile, the town was filling up with the other participating artists.

"They were all in the same froth that we were," said Siegel, laughing. "We'd see the newcomers arriving at the offices of the Biennial all bright-

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Daily Breeze

attention to all the things that are going on and respond to it, even when you're exhausted, the results can be really great."

In the case of the all-important patio installation, Siegel said, "The main issue was how well the density and weight of the stones would be contrasted by the lightness of the piece. And that did happen. It felt like the piece was buoyant. And it really did alter the environment around it."

Looking back, Siegel and Newhouse said they are exceedingly pleased with what they accomplished artistically. At the same time, both women agreed, they are convinced their presence had a positive impact on the young people they worked with.

"We weren't just there to take," said Newhouse. "We saw ourselves as cultural ambassadors."

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