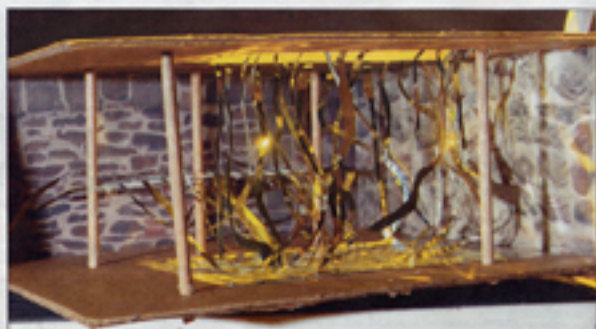


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• Art

A model shows one of three installation pieces in artist Fran Siegel's project called "Compassion." The piece uses mylar strips that will hang under a skylight and over a reflective pool.



San Pedro artist Fran Siegel exhibits 3 site-specific works at the prestigious International Biennial of Cuenca

REFLECTIONS ON ECUADOR

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Discovering an unsolicited e-mail from the U.S. State Department on your home computer could unnerve anyone.

So it's not surprising that Kristina Newhouse, artistic director of the Torrance Art Museum, was relieved to find that the message she received in August bore no sinister intent. In fact, it was an open invitation for grant proposals that would allow chosen artists to participate in the IX International Biennial of Cuenca in Ecuador, which opened Wednesday.

Those interested, it read, should submit conceptual ideas for installation pieces related to the theme: "The changing city, its relationship to geography and the influx of new technology."

And since this year's biennial would coincide with the 450th anniversary of the founding of the city by the Spanish, the event would have added significance.

Being chosen to participate in the prestigious festival, which attracts artists from North and South America, would certainly be a feather in the cap for the museum, Newhouse knew. The question was, which of the artists with whom she had worked was best suited to the project?

"When I read the proposal," Newhouse said, "Fran Siegel's work immediately came to mind, because Fran is very interested in the idea of 'place.' It seemed a perfect connection."

Siegel, who for the past two years has lived in San Pedro with her artist-husband Daniel Noord, has

developed an international reputation for her coolly luminous, perforated metal sculptures, minimalist paintings and site-specific installation pieces.

Using a variety of materials — from hanging stones and reflective mylar strips, to glowing "solar strings" — Siegel's work is contemplative, based on a subtle appreciation of the modulation, modification and reflection of light across and through her construction materials.

"Fran's interested in having people relate to her work over a period of time," Newhouse observed. "They're not pieces you walk up to and have that 'I get it' moment. The way they're constructed, they seduce the viewer into spending time observing the piece."

In December, Newhouse received a phone call from

Leanne Mella in the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, notifying her that her grant proposal had been accepted.

"We found out we had it. But we didn't receive the official notification until the middle of January," Newhouse said. "It's been a mad scramble ever since."

Part of the scramble involved finding a second South Bay arts institution (with the proper 501C, nonprofit, designation) to manage the project's funds. At that time, Newhouse explained, the Torrance Art Museum was in administrative transition and reluctant to take on the responsibility.

"We worked through Nathan Birnbaum and the Angel's Gate Cultural Center in San Pedro to process the paperwork and manage the money," Newhouse said. "There's \$75,000 involved. So it's serious. But that has to cover all the expenses: artist fees, travel, materials, installation expenses and printing the catalog, which will cost \$15,000."

In late January, Newhouse and Siegel arrived in Cuenca to search out potential locations.

For Newhouse, it was a return visit to the mountain city whose cultural roots date back to the year 500. The city is also known as the artistic center of modern Ecuador. And the Biennial is its most important cultural event, designed to showcase the art of the Americas (which is why the U.S. State Department is involved).

For Siegel, the trip represented an eye-opening first encounter. And she was immediately struck by Cuenca's fascinating juxtaposition of old and new.

"We looked at 20 or more sites," she recalled, standing among the various installation models and highly detailed design sketches that filled her San Pedro studio. "The city is dominated by Spanish colonial architecture, with hidden interior spaces — gardens within fortresslike structures. It's a perfect geometry of indoor-outdoor locations."

Siegel, a born-and-bred New Yorker now in her 40s, earned a fine arts degree in painting from Temple University's Tyler School of Art in 1982 and a master's in painting from Yale in 1987. Her paintings, sculpture and installation pieces have been extensively exhibited in the U.S. and Europe, and she is a member of the faculty of California State University, Long Beach.

When she began to envisage her ideas for Cuenca, Siegel said, she was determined not to create a piece of "plop art."

"I didn't want to do a New York- or L.A.-style piece and just import it to Cuenca," she said adamantly. "I wanted whatever I was going to create to respond directly to the site."

Acrylic shapes hang in a giant mobile at Fran Siegel's San Pedro studio. The artist won a grant from the State Department to participate in the IX International Biennial of Cuenca in Ecuador.

After days of searching, Siegel and Newhouse settled on three exceedingly different locations. The primary site was to be a rectangular stone walled patio attached to the city's main cathedral. The second was a starkly vertical interstitial space between two buildings. The third was a small colonial-style out-building onto which Siegel planned to cast variously colored projections.

Her title for the entire project is "Companion."

"It's about the idea that a person going to a place may encounter ghost images of the past, Inca architecture versus colonial architecture, how one usurped the other to form two cultural companions," she said. "Then there's me trying to learn and become a companion to the spaces."

Of the three installations, the patio project, which Siegel calls "Redistribution," is the most elaborate. It occupies a glass-covered patio outside the main walls of the Cathedral Vieja. Located at the colonial core of the city, this space, with its austere geometry and ancient stones, spoke volumes, Siegel said.

"There are so many stories in those stones," she said. "The foundation is Inca, the church is Spanish and the small stones [which comprise a catch basin at the center of the patio] cover what was once a pauper's burial

site."

The installation is defined by a gracefully swooping, seemingly lighter-than-air weave of mylar (mirrorlike fabric strips) that cast reflected beams on the rough-hewn surfaces of the stones. Holes of various sizes cut from a similar material cover the glass skylight, allowing

shafts of variegated light to enter the space.

The catch basin, which Siegel has transformed into a watery reflecting pool, is festooned with a fleet of floating mirrorlike dishes, which add another reflective dimension. Then, as a final touch, strategically placed fans give the entire piece

a constant sense of fluttering, flickering, floating motion.

"It's all about light, perception and dispersion. I want the piece to feel light, airy and reflective, balanced against the solid weight of the stones. I want it to

be spiritual and contemplative," Siegel said.

"This is a very big project for me and a great opportunity to propel my work to a new level."

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