

ART



LAURA PARKER

'UNTITLED 1969/2009': Bruce Nauman's land-art exhibition became reality. It reads, "Leave the land alone."

# Reaching for the sky

The Armory Center for the Arts has grown into a dynamic exhibition space. 'Installations Inside/Out' celebrates the gallery's development.

HOLLY MYERS

Stroll past the Armory Center for the Arts on any afternoon and you'll know that you've come upon a beloved institution. Children scurry in and out; teenagers loiter on the steps; parents and teachers confer on the sidewalk. The foyer is papered with schedules and announcements, and the hallways leading back to studios and offices are alive with the buzz of creative activity.

Established in 1947 under the aegis of the Pasadena Museum of Art (it's been independent since that museum closed in 1974), the Armory has a venerable history as a teaching institution, offering classes in drawing, painting, photography, ceramics, animation and other media for children and adults. More than 100,000 people pass through its doors every year.



SOPHIA BICOS Slangue Studio

**L.A. STORY:** A detail of Mario Ybarra Jr.'s "Reggie the Alligator: Wall of Fame." The show presents 20 newly commissioned, site-specific works.

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For 20 of these 60-plus years, however — since moving into its current Raymond Avenue location, a former National Guard building, in 1989 — the nonprofit organization has been building a parallel reputation as one of the most dynamic exhibition spaces in Pasadena and a vital asset to the art world in this region. The program celebrates its 20th anniversary this fall with one of its most ambitious exhibitions: "Installations Inside/Out." Curated by director Jay Belloli and program director Si-néad Finnerty-Pyne, the show presents 20 newly commissioned, site-specific works by artists the Armory has commissioned in the past. As the title suggests, roughly half of the works will be installed inside the gallery, the other half on public sites spread around Pasadena — or, in one case, in the air high above it.

Balancing the interests of a community-based educational institution with the interests of contemporary art is a tricky task, often resulting in indignation and anger on the one hand, or cautious, watered-down art on the other. The gallery itself — a mid-sized, high-ceilinged space nestled just beyond the foyer with a winding assortment of smaller rooms branching off and several nook-and-cranny spaces along a mezzanine upstairs — combines elements of both poles: the lively, inviting air of a community center and the professional installation standards of a museum or commercial gallery. Nowhere are the high standards clearer than in the anniversary show's strong, multi-generational lineup, which combines heavy hitters Ed Ruscha, Bruce Nauman, Daniel Buren, Barbara T. Smith and Betye Saar with first-rate mid-career and younger artists Kim Abeles, Pae White, Sarah Perry, Edgar Arceneaux, Barry McGee and Mario Ybarra Jr., among others.

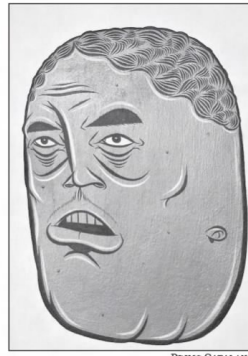
"We tried to have a range," Belloli says, "because that seemed like who we were. We've done famous artists and we've done mid-career artists, but we've also done artists who were just starting out, so we had to reflect that."

Directed since its inception by Belloli, the program has combined thoughtful, theme-driven group exhibitions, many of them organized by outside curators, with a selective handful of solo shows, including several pivotal mid-career retrospectives (Jill Giegerich, Eileen Cowin, Sarah Perry) and a number of historical markers, such as Tim Hawkinson's first exhibition in a nonprofit space (in 1996) and a survey of Robert Rauschenberg's largely unexamined work with Gemini G.E.L. print studio (upcoming).

#### Fundamental values

The show is intended not as a greatest hits but as a fresh embodiment of the program's core values: to showcase the rich artistic climate of Southern California (French artist Buren is one of the few exceptions); to provide a stimulating environment for the Armory's own students; to support artists in the creation of new

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**FATHEAD:** An untitled work by Barry McGee. The anniversary exhibition runs through the end of 2009.

#### 'Installations Inside/Out 20th Anniversary Exhibition'

**Where:** Armory Center for the Arts, 145 N. Raymond Ave., Pasadena and sites around the city

**When:** Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays; through Dec. 31

**Contact:** [www.armoryarts.org](http://www.armoryarts.org); (626) 792-5101

work by way of commissions; and to present a wide variety of curatorial positions.

Indeed, if there's anything the show neglects, it is the Armory's long roster of accomplished guest curators, which reads like a who's who of L.A.'s curatorial pool: Noel Korten, Josine Ianco-Starrels, Carol Ann Klonarides, Michael Duncan, Sue Spaid, Ann Ayres and Malik Gaines, among others. (Former LACMA curators Howard Fox and Tim Wride both have shows scheduled for next year.) The result has been an uncommonly contemplative and diverse array of group shows, exploring such topics as text, play, the cosmos, animals, food, environmental art, cartoons and comic-book imagery, Mexican street graphics, sensuality in abstraction and romanticism in landscape.

"Every show's different here," Finnerty-Pyne says. "That's what we hope for: That you walk in and you go, 'This looks nothing like what I saw when I was here last year.'"

There is another aspect of the show that, in Belloli's words in his catalog essay, "impl[ies] the direction of the Armory's program in the future," and that is the installation of art in the public realm. This

show is not the Armory's first such venture: It has enjoyed an amicable relationship with the One Colorado shopping complex in Old Town for a decade now, installing numerous installations there. (Buren's striped flags flutter over the courtyard now.) It is by far the most extensive effort to date, however.

The most demanding — but also, perhaps, most poetic — of the public projects, Nauman's "Untitled 1969/2009," was a one-time event that was launched last weekend. Conceived in 1969 for a land art exhibition at Cornell University, the piece was intended to create the phrase "Leave the land alone" in skywriting over the exhibition. It was never realized but came to the attention of former Armory assistant curator Andrew Berardini, who then solicited Nauman's permission to re-create the piece over Pasadena's Arroyo Seco (not far from the site of Nauman's former studio). A droll and cutting statement in its original context — as a critical response to the monumental excavations that were being created in the name of land art — it loses none of its poignancy nor its conceptual elegance today.

#### 'It's a toughie'

Most of the rest of the public works are similarly performance-based or interactive. Arizona-based artist Matthew Moore has installed a sculpture that produces organic vegetable seedlings — free to members of the community — in a vacant lot on Fair Oaks Avenue. Barbara T. Smith, who grew up in Pasadena, the third generation of a prominent local family, will spend two hours of every week through the duration of the show knitting at a different, personally significant location. Another Pasadena-born artist, Jane Mulfinger, has suspended a chandelier in an abandoned YMCA building, to be powered by a nearby pair of stationary bicycles.

When asked about the future of the public art effort as a policy, the characteristically genial and energetic Belloli looks for the first time just a little tired, from the sheer effort of maneuvering such an elaborate enterprise — newly commissioned works by 20 individual artists, half of them outside the walls of his own institution — through a period of economic downturn (most of the gallery's budget depends on grants). They would like to do more, he says, but it's difficult — the permission, the release forms, the logistics, the money. "It's a toughie," he admits.

Finnerty-Pyne turns to Belloli, whom she earlier described with visible affection as a mentor: "Jay, the first thing you told me when I got here is if I can teach you anything it's just to dream big, just go for it, just put it out there."

In addition to celebrating the last 20 years, "Installations Inside/Out" is a kind of swan song for Belloli, who will retire at the end of this anniversary year to pursue his own projects. "I think I've done everything I could do," he says. "It's time for somebody younger to come in and do their vision."

[calendar@latimes.com](mailto:calendar@latimes.com)

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