

SANDIEGO

Green & creative

New museum commissions art that engages children

By MARILYN ZEITLIN
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Once upon a time there was a museum for children, in a city by the sea named La Jolla. But many people thought the museum should be in a place where more people would visit.

So the museum moved to an old warehouse in San Diego, a bigger city by the sea. But the warehouse was just that, a warehouse, very old, very worn and too small for children and their parents to walk around in and look at pretty things.

Then one day, some people got together and said "Let's raze this place and build another museum." And the people met, and planned and worked. The New Children's Museum took six years to be finished.

A few months ago, the new 50,000-square-foot museum opened and people came from towns around Southern California and Mexico and many other places.

My grown daughter and I visited the museum with 200 other guests before the opening day's grand deluge. Lina Willis, a San Diego transplant from Philadelphia and mother of children ages 5 and 7, saw me taking notes. "If you're not from around here, you won't know just how anxiously we waited for this to happen," she said.

Imagination takes over

As we entered the contemporary concrete building through large glass doors, my eyes were directed sideways, up, down and around. One side of the entranceway was painted in pink stripes, the other was mirrored — so children could get a good look at themselves. Hanging from the ceiling was a large abstract, inflatable artwork that was impossible to ignore. It beckoned visitors to stand underneath and figure out its meaning.

After you passed through the entry — wow! look out! People of all ages were riding around the museum on "Legways" —



Children play around the artwork "People my Mother Feeds at Midnight, 2008," by Mark Malrone. PHOTO BY PABLO MASON

scooters with extra wheels. We saw a few novices trying to make headway with the Legway across the polished concrete floors. Tim Morris, 12, from Del Mar, was getting the hang of it: It's "kind of like a skateboard, but you use these upper wheels to move it," is how he described the experience.

Roman de Salvo, the San Diego artist who designed the Legway, watched riders going through the motions. "I wanted to do something against the trend, against things that are gas-powered. I wanted body power," he said. His creation, he said, is "very low-tech, no electronics, no engine, just plywood and wheelbarrow wheels."

The international artists selected for the museum's art

installations were chosen for their uniqueness, their creativity and their obvious playfulness. Lee Boroson from Brooklyn, N.Y., who made the "Graft" inflatable in the entry, said his colorful, multilayered structure is "based on a medical illustration of a cross-section of skin. We thought it belonged here, because this place is all about breathing. Look around you — it's all light and open space."

I told the artist that one child told me he thought "Graft" looked like a birthday cake, although I personally thought it seemed like a tropical island with palm trees.

Zlatan Vukosavljevic, a San Diego artist, created the hideaways and tunnels that crawling kids can zig-zag through. Bright



PHOTO BY ERICA DROR ZEITLIN

Camilo Artigas, 2, who was visiting from Mexico City, plays with foam tires in the romper room.

red tube lights show the way inside "Tent City." But what was that sound over "Tent City"? It seemed to be coming out of vacuum cleaners hanging high on the walls, but they were actually music machines designed by French artist Celeste Boursier-Mougenot.

They are dubbed "harmonica-chaos." Since they are sensitive to the sounds around them, their motors get turned on — and out comes harmonica music. These vacuums are among just one of many things in the museum that look like something recognizable, but turn out to be something completely alien.

As Rachel Teagle, executive director of the museum said, "We are a unique hybrid of a children's museum and an art museum."

The upstairs level has a Teen Studio. Only those "at least 13," may enter. According to the colorful cards that help visitors navigate the spaces, "You can hang out on a big pillow, make art and do whatever (well, you know what we mean, a respectful whatever)" there.

A playful spirit

Teens can also work with professional artists-in-residence in this space. Among the T-shirts hanging in the area were those printed with these messages: "Live what you love," and "Art is

what you can get away with."

The motto of the museum is "Think, Play, Create."

"We approach contemporary art with a playful spirit and take children's need for play seriously," said Laurie Mitchell, president of the museum's board of directors.

In other words, at this art museum, you won't hear anyone say "Don't touch," nor will a uniformed guard be watching your every move.

Ecology is a large part of the place. The building, designed by San Diego architect Rob Wellington Quigley, has windows that are automated on timers and open "when necessary" to create air flow, explained Jessica Hanson York, the museum's marketing and communications manager. "We estimate that our energy consumption is about half that of other buildings of the same size."

When I was tired, I rested on the large beanbags found in various corners and watched children discover bumpy things in the jungle room. Later, I marveled at the 2- and 3-year-olds who never seemed to tire of playing with piles of tires made from plushy foam in an upstairs romper room.

Then there were Anais, 8, and Pola, 12, the two daughters of Imperial Beach artist Alberto Caro, whose sculptural fantasy called "A Bird's Playground," sits

outside the entrance. Caro's children were more interested in climbing the walls than discussing their dad's sculpture. Soon they were climbing a huge mural combining Mexican and American themes — being careful to hang onto the handles.

'Just in time'

There's a lot to do and see here, for kids and for those who'd like to be kids again: Plan to spend at least two to three hours.

"We believe that the New Children's Museum opened just in time to meet an urgent community need, providing early exposure to visual arts at a time when arts curriculum is being increasingly cut from schools," said Hanson York.

The admission is \$10 for adults and kids; seniors and military pay half; and museum members can visit for free.

The museum is located at 200 W. Island Ave. For information, call (619) 233-8792 or visit www.thinkplaycreate.org.

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