Green & creative

New museum commissions art that engages children

By MARILYN ZEITLIN
Special Advertiser Section Writer

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 raise 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 delays. Linda 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 absolutely we were surprised by this so happen!” she said.

Imagination takes over

As we entered the contemporary curvilinear building through large glass doors, my eyes were directed upwards, up and 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, inflatable artefact that was impossible to ignore. I peered, visitors to stand underneath and figure out what it was.

After you passed through the entry — wow! look out! People of all ages were riding around the museum on “Legoys” — scooters with extra wheels. We saw a few novices trying to make headway with the Legoys across the polished concrete floor. Tim Morris, 12, from Del Mar, was having the hang of it. “It’s kind of like a skateboard, but you have these upper wheels to move it,” he said in describing the experience.

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

The international artists solicited 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 Whirly. 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 bird’s nest, although I personally thought it seemed like a tropical island with palm trees.

Zlatan Vukasinovic, a San Diego artist, created the hideaways and tunnels that crawling kids can zigzag through. Bright red tube lights show the way inside “Tort City.” But what was that sound over “Tort City”? It seemed to be coming out of vacuum cleaners humming high on the walls, but they were actually music machines designed by French artist Catherine Bourrie-Mougneret. They are called “Harmonics.” Since they are sensitive to the sounds around them, their motors get turned on — and out comes harmonica music. These vacuums are amusing just one of many things in the museum that look, like something recognizable, but turn out to be something completely alien.

As Rachel Teague, 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 space, “You can hang out on a big pillow, make an art and do whatever (well, you know what we mean, a respectful whatever)” there.

A playful spirit

Tears can also work with professional artists-in-residence in this space. Among the 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 mascot of the museum is “Think, Play, Create.” “We approach contemporary art with a playful spirit and take children’s needs for play seriously,” said Laurie Mitchell, president of the museum’s board of directors.

In other worlds, 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 Welles, 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 boulders found in various corner and watched children discover bumpy things in the jungle room. Later, I marveled at the 2- and 3-year-olds who never tried to stop playing with piles of tires made from plastic foam in an upstairs romper room.

Then there were Krais, 8, and Pala, 12, she 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; senior and military pay half, and museum members can visit for free.

The museum is located at 200 W. Island Ave. For information, call (619) 233-8797 or visit www.thinkplaycreate.org.

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