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Los Angeles, in Art Form, Comes to Beijing

By Debra Bruno, September 15, 2014

A new show at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing's 798 art district brings an eclectic mix of Los Angeles art to the Chinese capital.

"The LA Project" features seven artists' work sprawled over the center's cavernous rooms. Each artist, says curator Philip Tinari, was given carte blanche either to create new art for the show or bring in works from his or her collection.

The result is a charming miscellany of modern American art, including film strips, bronze sculptures and a mural-sized depiction of Anne Bancroft's extended leg from the 1967 movie, "The Graduate." Another installation recreates the feel of a studio lot, with a camera truck and palm trees on a flat wall.

Instead of trying to represent all of Los Angeles in one exhibition, Mr. Tinari says, the organizers decided to collect a group of artists living and working in L.A. who "made sense together."

One goal, he adds, was to show the "democracy that comes from having all these ideas in such close proximity." In addition to the exhibits themselves, each artist put together a book to describe his or her work. UCCA will also host a series of events, including film screenings connected to L.A., talks by the artists and performance art.

The performance art includes a talk-show style discussion with L.A. artist Alex Israel and Hong Kong actor Edison Chen, whose intimate photographs with well-known Hong Kong and Chinese stars created a media sensation when they were leaked and published online in 2008.

Other exhibits include mattresses and couches molded out of silicon from artist Kaari Upson, who in 2003 came upon an abandoned house in L.A. and discovered a host of personal items of a man she called Larry. The last 10 years of her artistic career have involved a reimagining of Larry's life. Ms. Upson includes items at the UCCA that might have been found in Larry's L.A. home.

Bozo the Clown, the American baby-boom era cartoon figure, is central to artist Kathryn Andrews' work at UCCA. She installed aluminum barrels covered with pictures of Bozo topped with aluminum stools.

Matthew Monahan, whose exhibit at UCCA includes bronze sculptures and charcoal drawings, says he drew some inspiration from traveling to China in 2002, when he says his "vision of the world was altered."

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The other exciting thing to him about being in China, he says, is the chance to connect to other artists. In L.A., he says, "we can be quite isolated," with individual studios that aren't within walking distance of other artists'.

The show altogether is a "case study of a city where art matters," says Mr. Tinari. Since there has been so much talk of California in the art world in recent years, the UCCA curators thought "it would be a cool idea to do something in Beijing that has an effect on the situation back in L.A.," he adds.

For the Chinese journalists at a press conference introducing the exhibition, though, the focus had a more practical angle. Why, asked one, would artists live and work in Los Angeles when real estate in Houston is so much cheaper?

"Because it's paradise," replied co-curator Paula Tsai.

—Debra Bruno