

One of L.A.'s Most Fascinating and Rebellious Museums Is in ... El Segundo?

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"No one would ever admit this," says Bernhard Zunkeler, the Berlin-based curator of the El Segundo Museum of Art's 11th exhibition. "But 95 percent of people, when they buy a piece of art, they want it to match the walls or the couch."

The current exhibition, or "experience," as the museum calls its programs, is "Home," and it consists of a series of rooms, each with its own combination of art objects, collectible furniture and quirky design decisions. In the "kitchen," German duo Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographs of weathered houses hang on the back wall, a GE

refrigerator from 1933 stands in the back corner and green, scale-like linoleum covers the floor. "It's like we killed Godzilla," Zunkeler says of the flooring.

Zunkeler's sister, Eva Sweeney, opened ESMoA two years ago with her husband, real estate developer/art collector Brian Sweeney. He describes the floor as "crocodile skin." The whole experience, he says, is "a little bit making fun of the idea that 'I need something to match the sofa.'"

"There are other possibilities for art in your home," says Zunkeler, who visits L.A. frequently and began influencing the Sweeneys' art collecting years before the museum opened. "You could get your house inspired by an artwork."

In one room, the purple flooring took its inspiration from flowers in a 1920 painting by German impressionist Max Slevogt. Another artwork, by L.A.-based Flora Kao, inspired Zunkeler to drive out to the desert with Vincent Alpino, his installer, to salvage wood from abandoned homes to use for walls of another room. "Basically, we created an apartment space inside the galleries," Zunkeler says. "It proves that if you let your home be inspired by the artwork, you can get this totally bizarre, interesting feeling."

Eva Sweeney, the architect who designed the museum's narrow, high-ceilinged building, helped Zunkeler with the layout for "Home," which changed right up until the October opening. "I'm the facilitator," she says. "He has the main vision and then I advise him." This is how it has usually worked with the experiences at ESMoA. All of them have single-word titles — the museum opened with a show called "Desire" — and they nearly always feature work from the Sweeneys' collection.

Zunkeler, who has worked in the corporate world and as an artist and curator, describes the curating effort as a "shared vision," but both Sweeneys defer to him when asked about the details of that vision. "I don't know if we've brainwashed each other," Eva says, but she and Brian tend to agree with her brother's instincts.

In "Home," work that has been on the Sweeneys' own walls is arranged in an idiosyncratic environment where historic painters mingle with young upstarts. The show reflects exactly the juxtaposition that makes ESMoA compelling: Though it's a private museum run by people with resources most others don't have, its disregard for the formality that defines many museums makes it surprisingly personable.

Brian Sweeney, 53, sailed with the Canadian team in the 1984 Olympics before amassing wealth through investments in commercial real estate and historic coastal land. He began collecting art seriously only after marrying Eva. She and Zunkeler, both in their 40s, grew up in Bochum, Germany, where their parents regularly took them to art museums.

In contrast to other fussed-over prominent private museums, such as Alice Walton's Crystal Bridges in Arkansas and the soon-to-open Broad Museum downtown, ESMoA arrived on El Segundo's Main Street almost by accident. The Sweeneys had been collecting everything from 19th-century Corot paintings to 1980s photorealism, and they needed more space to store their art. They live in Manhattan Beach but, in nearby El Segundo, real estate was cheaper. So Brian Sweeney acquired a 25-foot-wide lot next to the former El Segundo post office, then bought that vacated post office as an investment too. Maybe the lot would have remained a storage site if former El Segundo mayor Eric Busch hadn't suggested the city would benefit more from having a first-rate art collection on its Main Street if people could occasionally see it.

After that, plans "got bigger and bigger," Zunkeler says, until the Sweeneys had a building with flexible layout, an apartment in the back for international artists-in-residence and a rooftop patio with a view of the Chevron refinery, LAX and Pacific Ocean.

ArtInfo blogger William Poundstone is a big proponent of ESMoA, and it made ArtInfo's list of top private museums last year. Still, it's not that well known within L.A.'s larger art community.

In the trailer that accompanied ESMoA's 2013 opening, Zunkeler describes the museum's acronym as "right between Samoa and MoMA, which means, like, it could be an island in the Caribbean or it could be something close to high-end art presentation." Similarly, "Home" straddles that space between a freewheeling experiment and the conventional museum show. Asks the press release, "Do old masterpieces bore you to tears? Are you only interested in letting the brightness of contemporary art lighten up your home? ... What kind of art, for that matter, is allowed in the bathroom?"

There are no wall labels, though visitors can use the iPads set up around the space to learn more about individual works. The domestic objects, such as the vintage refrigerator, the Eero Aarnio bubble chair and the 1950s toilet in the "bathroom" come from the collection of computer engineer Eric Brill, who now heads eBay's research laboratories and has given objects to the Museum of Modern Art.

The whole show begins with three altered posters by young L.A. artist Cole Sternberg, blurry photographs of people demonstrating home-protection techniques. One guy, with translucent, hot pink paint dripping from his eyes, lurks behind a trash can with knife raised.

Then there's a backpack, also by Sternberg, made of aluminum and concrete, sitting in a corner next to an original Honda CB750 lent by Brill. "People tend to forget this motorcycle almost killed the whole motorcycle industry," Zunkeler says. When it was introduced in 1972, it was so much better than its competitors that other companies almost buckled.

Zunkeler sees this first corridor as being about security and fear of invaders, whatever their form.

The rustic room built of dark wood taken from desert wrecks is sweeter. An 1890 painting by German impressionist Max Liebermann hangs near the entrance. In it, a woman looks out the door of a cottage made of wood, which is about as dark as the wood on which the painting hangs. Globular forms of colored glass and plastic by Tokyo-based Taka Kagitomi also sit in that room. They vaguely resemble lamps.

In the bathroom, instead of a shower curtain, there's Flora Kao's rubbing on fabric of the side of a rough wood house. Street artist Eddie Rico designed the purple-and-teal patterned floor, and two assemblages by reclusive midcentury sculptor Joseph Cornell hang on the walls. One includes a smiling gold sun beside a photo of a devout child and behind a hanging brass ring. Installed so near a Dreyfuss sink and toilet, the Cornell looks far more accessible and quirky than his work does in galleries at, say, the Art Institute of Chicago.

"We try to give people ideas," Zunkeler says. "Things don't necessarily have to look always the same way."

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