

Art is an experience and an adventure at ESMoA in El Segundo

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In 2014, artnet named ESMoA (the El Segundo Museum of Art) as one of the top ten privately-owned contemporary art museums in America.

ESMoA's rise has been rapid. Just two years ago, as we were writing in advance of the opening exhibition, we were wondering just how well an experimental "art laboratory" (which is what ESMoA prefers to call itself) would do in an area – the South Bay – that has never been able to sustain anything avant-garde, no art house cinemas or cutting edge theaters. Of course, the optimism of its founders was there from the start, but we all know how it is when dreams go head-to-head with reality.

From all appearances, however, this is one art venue that has not only enjoyed success but has been recognized and valued by its peers in the art world. It all began with the vast art collection belonging to Brian and Eva Sweeney, Manhattan Beach residents, with the curatorial knowledge and inspiration of Eva's brother, Bernhard Zuenkeler, who has overseen all of the major exhibitions. One of ESMoA's visible slogans is "Provoke yourself," and indeed that is what they have done – pushed their viewers to encounter art in ways that differ from the traditional museum- or gallery-going experience. For example, the year opened with "Sting," in which five young artists from Cuba spent several weeks in residency here creating various projects. The exhibition space was pretty much a "works-in-progress" environment in which the public could wander in at various times and see the artists at work and even talk with them about what they were doing. We did that at some length with Mauricio Abad, whose video mapping project took place at El Segundo High School. "Silence," which was on view last spring, featured abstract art from the Sweeney collection, and the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate works encouraged dialogues or confrontations between them, with the viewer as something of an intermediary. "Silence" was a slightly ironic title, because expressionistic or impressionistic art always makes "noise" of an intellectual sort as we immerse ourselves in it and seek patterns or connections.

This was followed by what seems to have been a breakout show, "Scratch," in which ESMoA partnered with the Getty Research Institute. Mirroring the *liber amicorum* or "friendship books" that were in vogue a few centuries ago (books where others – family, acquaintances, colleagues – could write or draw some kind of memento), numerous Los Angeles-based graffiti artists were given paper and asked to contribute a work towards what became known as the "L.A. Liber Amicorum." After all, the black books that many graffiti artists carry around with them today, where they can share "styles" with other artists, aren't so vastly different than what people were doing with their friendship books in the past. This led to the exhibition itself, under the curatorial direction of the Getty's David Brafman, with Lisa Cambier, in which about 50 graffiti artists gathered into crews and divided up the ESMoA interior into six sections, and then went to work with brushes and paint cans and covered the entire walls (actually large wooden panels that were subsequently taken down and stored) with their colorful art. It was a dazzling sight to behold, both during the creation and after the work was completed.

As Bernhard Zuenkeler remarked, "Many people from the museum world acknowledged that they had never seen a more diverse crowd from all parts of Los Angeles coming to our show. Almost 10,000 people from all religious, ethnic and age

backgrounds visited “Scratch” and made it exactly what we hoped for – a unique experience to open people’s minds in order to feel the energy of art.”

“Home,” which opened in October and is up through Feb. 1, saw the interior of ESMoA partitioned in such a way that the experience seems like an art show within the configured designs of a showroom or design center. Visually, it’s a mix-and-match sort of thing with the concept being that there are no limits to how we can devise and arrange the space we live in, especially with regard to the art with which we surround ourselves, which not only makes us feel comfortable but to some extent defines who we are or how we see ourselves.

As with previous shows, “Home” is an experience or experiment, and as always viewers are impacted to various degrees. Some of the installations stay with us longer, but either way we are constantly surprised and often “provoked” – which again is what ESMoA wants. As Chelsea Hogan commented, “our mission is to spread the spirit of creativity.” But ESMoA is about more than just staging exhibitions: It really does strive to engage the local community, a point which Zuenkeler goes out of his way to emphasize. As he said in a recent email, “The other sweet highlights in 2014 were our summer camps and the increasing collaboration with Mycall’s Learning Center, giving young kids a tremendous experience and in the case of Mycall a very private and maybe life-changing experience.”

What can we expect from ESMoA in 2015? The first show, according to Zuenkeler, will be a collaboration between Cornelia Funke, the successful author of books for children, and Mirada Studios, a company based in Marina del Rey that merges the classic narrative tradition of storytelling with emerging technologies.

In June, Los Angeles County Museum of Art director Michael Govan and curatorial assistant Nana Bahlmann will bring the work of the late Norbert Tadeusz (1940-2011) to ESMoA for the venue’s first solo show. Tadeusz was a painter and draftsman, a figurative artist who often depicted the female form, and who was also one of Joseph Beuy’s master pupils. Thus the year ahead looks promising. Going to ESMoA’s exhibitions and installations is always something special, a journey and an adventure.

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