

THE RADAR ART

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TREAD LIGHTLY: Brian Dick sits among his pillow-based tribute to Allan Kaprow.

ALL-AGEISM!

From giant inflatable hair follicles to a Porta Party plucked from Art Basel, the New Children's Museum is Warhol meets Pee Wee's Playhouse—serious art statement intact

Want a new library? Please hold. A plush eatery at the La Jolla Playhouse? Been "coming soon" for a while. Of all the pending cultural projects in San Diego, the New Children's Museum (NCM) in Downtown is one of the few to escape the blueprint stage. And while it might be for the kids, it's no McPlayland designed by finger-painting educators. In terms of art—real art, by seriously respected artists—it's one of the biggest developments to hit S.D. in years.

Inside this rambling glass-and-concrete palace is a multistory clash of high art and low sight lines, starting with the screaming hello of the very bright, very pink bridge that spans a subterranean gallery and leads visitors from the front door to the lobby. The best part of the bridge is likely to be lost on grown-ups, who have to stoop down to child's eye level to see how the pink stripes painted on one side are reflected in mirrors on the other side. It's also the clearest evidence of the depth of NCM's commitment to youngsters as its first and most important audience.

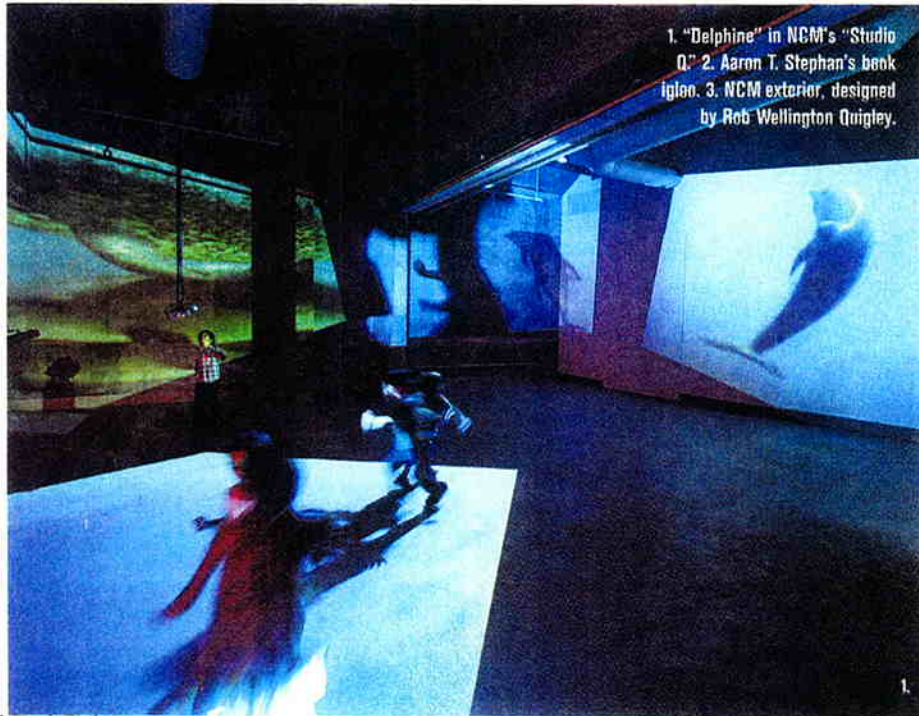
It took 12 artists two weeks to render the bridge, a design by Mexican artist Maurycy Gomulicki, whose "Pink Not Dead" series is a countercultural favorite reminiscent of Warhol's Technicolor Pop Art. It

should also be noted that Gomulicki owns a chain of pink-themed sex shops, but that didn't dissuade NCM curators from hiring the talented conceptualist for a G-rated installation.

Upstairs, San Diego's Brian Dick created a room filled with car-tire pillows and mattresses as an homage to Allan Kaprow, the iconic performance artist who helped form the Fluxus group with Bertolt Brecht and Roy Lichtenstein. The "Porta Party"—a mobile relief unit transformed into a one-person party space with a disco ball and booming sound system—was originally discovered at Art Basel.

In championing real art over Nickelodeon-style edutainment, the NCM is luring nearly as many adults as kids. "We've been overwhelmed with requests for corporate events," says Jessica Hanson-York, the museum's director of marketing. Most notably, NCM hosted 1,500 for the opening-night soirée of Qualcomm's BREW Conference—one of S.D.'s most illustrious corporate galas.

"It's a space and frame of mind where it is difficult, fortunately, to distinguish between child and adult," says Ernest Silva, a prominent San Diego artist whose "Rain House" has appeared in both CONTINUED...



...CONTINUED incarnations of the Children's Museum.

The main lobby walls are mounted with vacuum cleaners that, when triggered by motion sensors, suck air through harmonicas and fill the museum with a sort of wheezing, old man's song. A giant inflatable work created by Lee Boroson hangs from the ceiling to the left of the lobby. Hanson-York recalls asking one boy what he thought it was, and the boy replied, "Cake." And though Boroson actually based the piece on a skin graft—a vaguely unsettling source of inspiration—there's little doubt he'd be totally fine with the boy's interpretation.

The list goes on. A tropical forest created by SDSU furniture design grad Tanya Aguiniga is made entirely of stuffed fabrics of various colors and textures. There's a "climbing mural"—a wall-sized urban graffiti scene with

footholds and handgrips designed by members of the city's aerosol art collective, Writerz Blok. Downstairs, the creepy-cool shadow puppet theater was painted by another SDSU grad, Mark Mulrone. Mulrone—who now teaches art at San Francisco State University—topped his painting with a giant, monochromatic head whose open mouth unleashes a stream of highly stylized vomit. Hanson-York smiles and shrugs: "Let's be honest," she says, "kids like vomit."

Add to this a video installation that seems to suspend viewers in waters shared by a pod of dolphins and you've got a set of experiences that are more than just touching art. They're total immersion.

"This is the essence of what we're after," says Rachael Teagle, the museum's director and the mother of a three-year-old daughter. Formerly a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, she says NCM strives to "exhibit a sophisticated level of art from serious artists whose stature in the national and international art world is well established yet whose art is capable of touching people of any age."

Fresh ideas clearly motivated Rob Wellington Quigley's architecture for the visually fabulous and thoroughly "green" building. The facade facing the Convention Center offers a rich Post-Modern mix of rectilinear forms and surfaces, while its Front Street facade suggests a glass-paneled office building that has fallen over on its side and slid part way into the ground. In fact, this unlikely orientation simply reflects the optimal angle, relative to the sun at midday, for the rooftop solar panels that generate roughly a third of its maximum power needs.

The museum amply encourages kids to create, not simply consume creativity. Materials are placed at workstations intermingled with the exhibition spaces, and classes and special summer camps are log-jammed with applicants. Kids can hand-cast clay, cut paper into shapes for a shadow puppet show, or build model cars to race down a specially built track. Grown-ups, at business parties or simply chaperoning a smaller version of themselves, are encouraged to do the same.

NCM's official motto is "Think, Play, Create." The fact that "Play" is second on that list may or may not be intentional. ■

The New Children's Museum, 200 West Island Ave., Downtown, 619.233.8792, www.thinkplaycreate.org.