

New artistic haunts

Phantom Galleries transforms abandoned storefronts into vibrant art space to fire the creative spirit

By Lucinda Michele Knapp

On a tree-lined stretch of East Colorado Boulevard, a mother walks slowly down the sidewalk with a toddler, taking halting steps as her daughter awkwardly wobbles along. Holding the little girl's hand, the mother looks into the window of the storefront alongside her and halts, staring at the large display within. Mom picks up her little girl and points inside. They both peer in and the little girl reaches out, patting the windowpane with her hand.

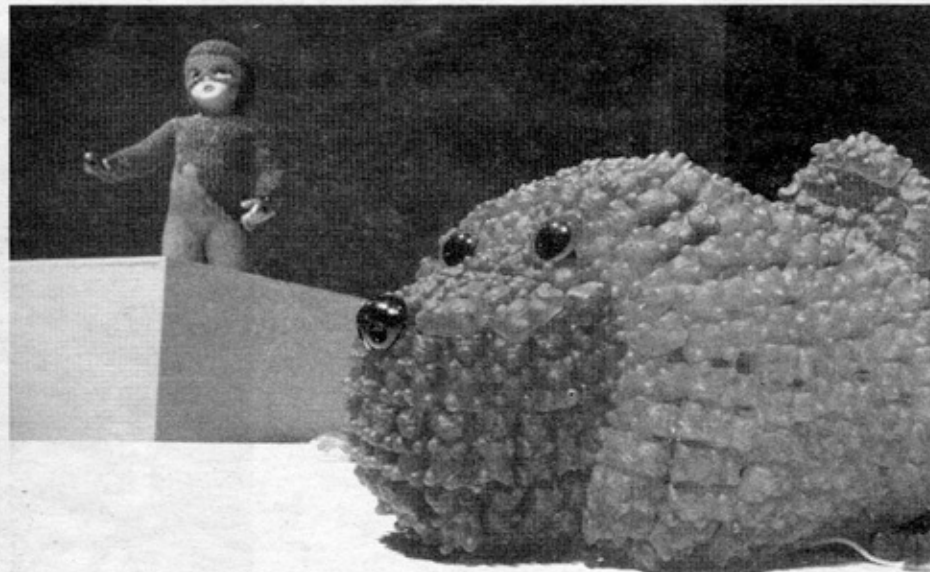
This would be a common scene in front of, say, FAO Schwartz, but here in Pasadena's Playhouse District, across from Vroman's Bookstore and abutted by the stop-then-start-then-stop-again traffic on Colorado, the window doesn't hold toys or even carefully posed fashions. Instead, a ring of shopping carts, poised as if in action, fall toward one another like they were bursting into flame. Made with God knows what — papier-mâché, sculpted plastic, whatever — the "flames" are so lifelike that the metal of the carts appears to be dissolving into fire, shopping trolleys from hell. The little girl beams with glee.

Phantom Galleries has struck again.

A project with roots in downtown LA's Gallery Row, Phantom Galleries enters unoccupied and vacant storefronts, such as the aforementioned former Biggars furniture store (more recently Homestead House, now echoingly vacant), re-purposing their windows and sometimes their interior with fine art — "haunting" the abandoned property until the space is sold.

Creator Liza Simone, a downtown artist, first came up with the idea as a way for her and fellow artists to accomplish multiple goals: to get their work shown, reclaim abandoned space in the community (as artists were being pushed out by the loft explosion) and bump up quality of life in the neighborhood.

continued on page 18



YaYa Chou's Gummy Bear masterpieces "Chandelier" and "Simon"

continued from page 17

During an arts symposium and workshop, Simone met Laura Zucker, executive director of the LA County Arts Commission, and the rest is breathless history.

"Laura was there and she was sitting alone," Simone recalls. "I was like, 'Oh my god!' I had just read about her, so I plopped myself at her table and talked her ear off for 20 minutes all to myself — how could you ever get that? — and she broke out her BlackBerry and gave me the names of people in Beverly Hills, Pasadena, business improvement districts and chambers of commerce. If we've achieved anything it's thanks to her."

"That's what I'm hoping Phantom Galleries does — create more general public interest in art."

—Liza Simone

Armed with her new contacts plus partners Dan Scott and David Pelton, Simone drew her own artist friends into the project and was able to expand into Pasadena and Beverly Hills. The trio recruited artists as curators, thereby circumventing the usual relationship between galleries and artists (in which artists are bound to their gallery and often have to relinquish a percentage of their sale to the gallerist). The current show in the vacant Biggars furniture store was curated by Brian and Mary Mallman, artists from the "NELA" area (northeast LA: Highland Park, Eagle Rock, Mount Washington, Glassell Park and other nearby communities).

"Liza contacted us about showing some of our [own] work. As the conversation went on, she asked if Mary and I were interested in curating a window. [We] decided that if we were going to do it, we would like to do the entire Pasadena building, all 11 windows. We spoke with Liza and she was

open to the idea," says Mallman. Over beers at a Highland Park dive, the two artists convened a small assembly of locals whose outstanding art deserved the attention Biggars' then-wasted display windows would confer.

The present show, drawing the attention of toddlers and adults alike, is appropriately called "Liminal," as the ephemeral art installations transform the corner of Colorado and El Molino Avenue into a surprising, delightful urban efflorescence of inspiration.

From the flaming shopping carts by Christian Tedeschi to ghostly, evanescent paintings of light and darkness by Erika Lizee; from YaYa Chou's luminously bejeweled "chandelier" created from thousands of gold, red and green Gummi Bears (yes!) to Susan Bolles' candy-colored images of soap bottles at rest, filtering light like innocuously chemical containers of stained glass, Biggars, once a purveyor of some of the finest home furnishings in Los Angeles, has now been transformed into a home for creation. And it's catching.

"I was there the other day," says Simone, "and in a window a little ways away, a lawyer's office, someone had started putting up paintings — making the window into a little mini gallery." She makes motions with her hands of ripples spreading.

Carl Burmeister, an artist whose work has been shown in past installations at the Biggars space and who works at the Pasadena Playhouse, speaks to the expansion of the arts in the area: "Pasadena seems to be getting more and more lively from a cultural perspective. As more people choose to live here, I think there will be more demand for the arts locally."

If the reaction of the foot traffic and other local businesses is any measure of demand, Burmeister is dead-on.

"My family wasn't big into the arts, so I was always the odd bird out, trying to get them to pay attention to my interests," explains Simone. "But if they had had more exposure to art, if it was a part of their daily life, then maybe families would have a more natural inclination toward it. That's what I'm hoping Phantom Galleries does — create more general public interest in art."

Judging by one little girl's reaction to a collection of shopping carts set gleefully ablaze, Simone's dream is indeed lighting creative fires in others as well. □

To participate as an artist, curator, sponsor or host to a Phantom Gallery, call (213) 626-2854 or visit www.PhantomGalleriesLA.com.

note: other featured images of this article have been eliminated due to space constrain on the web page.