

# 'Love in the Ruins' Explores the Impact of Tensions in L.A.

■ **Art:** Exhibit in Long Beach focuses on the inspiring aspects, from ethnic complexity to tectonic instability.

By ZAN DUBIN  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

**R**iot, fires, floods, earthquake, 5,000 aftershocks. Max Almy and Teri Yarbrow of Encino have had no shortage of raw material for their newest artwork about life in a troubled urban paradise.

"It's definitely been inspiring," Almy says wryly.

"Utopia," the artists' interactive installation, features a darkly ironic, metaphoric video game in which players make high-stakes decisions while viewing footage of Los Angeles' yin and yang: Its blue swimming pools, palm trees and swanky shops; its homeless people, choked freeways, the recent fires, the Reginald O. Denny beating.

The work is part of "Love in the Ruins: Art and the Inspiration of L.A.," a multimedia group exhibit at Long Beach Museum of Art, which attempts to show the impact on 23 artists of L.A.'s multifaceted nature, from its evolving ethnic complexity to its tectonic instability.

"I wasn't interested in identifying some kind of regional sensibility or style," said Long Beach museum curator Noriko Gamblin, who organized the exhibit. "I was interested in how the artists had internalized certain aspects of L.A.'s culture or environment and how that was showing in their work."

All of the show's artists now live or have spent long periods of time in L.A. Despite the premise of the show, however, not all are convinced that fact has shaped their creative output.

John Baldessari, the exhibit's elder statesman, hedged his bets. During a recent interview at the Santa Monica studio where he's worked for nearly a quarter of a century, the pioneering Conceptual artist said he "can't see" how or where his work reflects or is inspired by L.A.

In "Two Chests: Heart and Soul," a previously unexhibited

woman is placed above a photograph of a bare-chested man who appears to be lying in a hospital bed.

Both the man's face and woman's face are obscured, in typical Baldessari fashion, and both photographs are movie stills, which Baldessari has used for decades—but never chosen content or connection to Hollywood, he said.

"It was just that I wanted to find cheaply available photographs," said the artist, 62. "They could have been of anything."

"I always tend to think I could do my work anywhere," he said. "But, how does one know? There's no way to do a control experiment. I mean, I've seen other people change [their work when they leave L.A.], but I've seen other people not change. So, I just don't know."

Linda Hudson of Sherman Oaks isn't so sure of L.A.'s effect either. A light-and-space artist who has constructed for the exhibit "Separate Spaces," a sight-specific work composed of a wafer-thin, suspended plexiglass sheet that divides one of the museum's galleries in half, she said recently that she's been keenly aware of L.A.'s "expansive space."

"When I'm driving on the freeways, I'm always mapping out how big the space in front of me is," she said. "When I'm in New York, I have to look up to see if the sky is still there between the tall buildings."

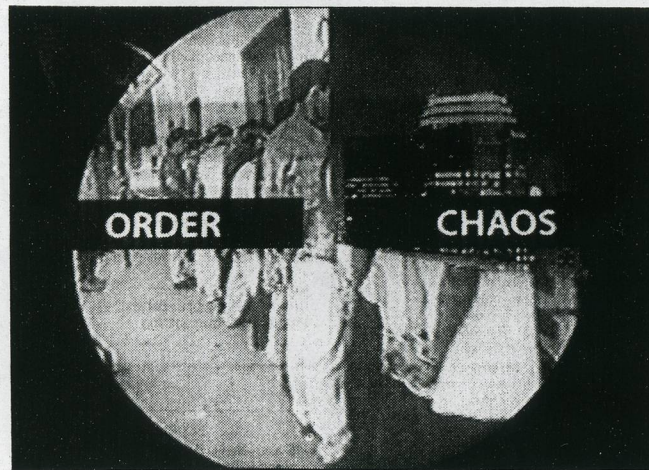
But, Hudson said, she's chiefly interested in how her work transforms the light or space around it—rather than drawing attention to the work itself—thus her raw materials of light and space are obviously not linked to any of the cities, including L.A., in which she's worked. Nor, she said, has L.A.'s constant state of flux, both social and geographic, factored into her creative process.

"It just so happens that my work is extremely fragile and sometimes transient, both literally and conceptually, but I don't see that in



TAMMY LECHNER / Los Angeles Times

Steven Criqui, the exhibit's youngest artist, likes to examine the "creation of fantasy" so popular in L.A.



BRIAN VANDER BRUG / For The Times

Max Almy's interactive "Utopia" projects the city's brutal contrasts.

Almy and Yarbrow, who have lived in the city for more than a decade, do see clear-cut links.

The collaborators describe their piece as a nonliteral "conceptual poem," in which players must make split-second "ethical choices" by pulling the trigger of the gun to select one word from each of several dichotomous word-pairs briefly superimposed over the video's fast-paced photo montage.

The word pairs represent moral conundrums bombarding urban dwellers—Obsession/Gratification, Inclusion/Exclusion, Progress/Decline—or L.A.'s dual identity as sun-drenched Eden and land of

Heaven/Hell, Paradise/Utopia. Performance artist Rachel Rosenthal appears on screen to encourage players and assess their performance.

"I almost have to live in a place like this," Almy said, "because I'm very interested in the contemporary dilemma. L.A. is where you feel those tensions."

Adds Yarbrow, whose large round paintings of roiling magma—symbolizing both psychic and geologic turbulence—flank the installation: "The only other place I'd like to live is Santorini, a Greek island that is also prone to earthquakes and has two active volca-

L.A. has likewise been a persuasive muse for painter Steven Criqui, who makes social commentary about such subjects as personal responsibility with his quirky, abstract depictions of the city's buildings, plants and signage.

The exhibit's youngest artist at 30, Criqui said he's been fascinated by this "built environment" since 1976, when he moved from the East to Southern California with his family.

"We pulled up into the driveway of this tract home in Orange County in our Ford station wagon," said the Santa Monica resident, "and I just couldn't believe how banal and ugly the building was."

Raised in an environment that, unlike much of Southern California, had more greenery than steel, stucco and concrete, he's been trying to make sense of various aspects of L.A.'s "practice of artifice" and "creation of fantasy" ever since. Home to Hollywood, theme parks galore and a powerful advertising industry, "L.A. is the magic kingdom" of all that, he said.

"I love the imaginative quality of all of it," Criqui said, "and I'm not looking down at it. There's this really rich iconography out there that says a lot about our culture."

■ "Love in the Ruins: Art and the Inspiration of L.A." runs through May 22 at Long Beach Museum of Art, 2300 E. Ocean Blvd., Long Beach. Hours are Wednesdays through Sundays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; until 8 p.m. on Fridays. Admission, \$1-\$2. Information: (310) 429-2119.

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