

ART REVIEW

Inside/Outside: Artist Environments

By Molly Samuel

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The Museum of Craft and Folk Art is tucked between restaurants and hotels near Yerba Buena. It's not a big place; more gallery- than museum-sized, and it's dwarfed by its neighbor, the Contemporary Jewish Museum. The gallery itself is small, but luckily it feels more intimate than cramped.

That sense of intimacy is put to good use in the museum's current exhibition of artists' spaces. **Inside/Outside** introduces places—for the most part artists' homes—that have been transformed into complete, enveloping experiences. They all have the feel of beloved life-long projects.

The focal point of the show is Bolinas surfer Mike Shine's home, reproduced in full size in the gallery. It's pretty convincing. In the video documenting Shine's work and the creation of this installation, I wasn't always sure which was his real home and which one the reproduction. It's not just the look of the place that works, but also the feel. When I first walked in, there were museum-goers sitting around the kitchen table, chatting with each other. The installation is all about welcoming visitors into an artist's environment, so I gave in to my first impulse and checked out the record collection (Rolling Stones, Kiss, recordings of whale songs).

The cabin sets the bar high for the rest of the show, and I was disappointed to find that the rest was, for the most part, photos of other spaces and biographies of their creators. Given the space limitations, the museum obviously couldn't have recreated the Watts Towers in the gallery, but on the other hand, one needn't pay museum admission to see photographs of the Towers and read about the man who built them. I was left with the feeling that I was looking at the pages of a well-curated coffee table book hung on the walls.

But the exhibition does show a vibrant array of artists' homes and environments in California. I fantasized about a road trip to those places until I realized most of them are no longer intact. The artists -- the majority were adults during the Depression -- have passed away, and their relatives and communities either lacked the money or the interest to preserve their eccentric collections of hubcaps, wooden dolls, fake flowers, and layers of paintings that made up the worlds those artists created. The photographs and bios serve as memorials to those people, outsider artists who poured their time and energy into creating their own worlds.

Inside/Outside is up for one more week; it closes on May 24, 2009. For more information visit the Museum of Craft and Folk Art's website.

This article appears at <http://www.kqed.org/arts/visualarts/article.jsp?essid=24646>

ART REVIEW

Art Shacks

By Kristin Farr
March 13, 2009



A friend recently compared my apartment to her grade school notebook covered in stickers because my walls are plastered with colorful things I've made. The stuff is just stored there, looking at me, constantly nagging me to find it another home. But for some artists, the homes they occupy become works of art themselves, with no suggestion of a need for a removal. The interior might be painted with murals, the stairway made of shells, or the yard covered in handcrafted wooden dolls with tape recorders in their mouths. It is not surprising to discover that more than a handful of homes like these have existed within the borders of our dear California -- land of fruits, nuts, and artists.

For the Museum of Craft and Folk Art's *Inside/Outside* exhibition of artist environments, Mike Shine was commissioned to create what he calls a 90% true-to-life replica of his home in Bolinas where figures inspired by mythology, philosophy and the devil roam free on painted walls and doors. A fireplace crackles in the cozy, orange, 70s mod-style room, complete with lava lamp, an 8-track tape collection, butterfly chairs, and a wolf-man sitting at the kitchen table, beer in hand. You can get comfy in there. There's a shelf of books, and Shine invites you to take a load off and create some art in an available sketchbook. I drew an owl. The shack's exterior also remains true to the original; a surfboard leans against the wall next to a set of barbecue tools. Though the doors don't open, and the loft ladder leads to nowhere, the remake gives a genuine sense of Shine's real home -- documented on his Web site -- where his life and art intermingle just the way he likes it. The story of how he met his wife was one of the first things he painted on the walls, in his signature surf-style font. Anyone with a fondness for the 70s aesthetic will love his work. Though my grandmother's house wasn't orange, Shine's installation made me think of her bungalow in rural Pennsylvania. She called it The Teepee and everything inside was blue or purple. When we visited she'd pick dandelions and weeds for "health shakes," and practice acupuncture on our little feet, while we'd drink Postum out of blue-speckled mugs.

Legendary twentieth-century California folk art environments are documented in the exhibition with trios of neatly mounted photographs that tell the stories of places like Nitt Witt Ridge in Cambria and the Watts Towers in L.A.—places where artists with a repurposing knack used hoards of recycled materials to create their kitschy castles.

Perhaps the most intriguing folk art environment was Calvin and Ruby Black's Possum Trot where the couple made dolls from Sugar Pine and Redwood scraps. Carved by Calvin and dressed in Ruby's handmade frocks, the female dolls were stand-ins for the children the couple didn't have. Calvin rigged the dolls with tape recorders and DIY animatronics and put on a roadside show for twenty-five cents admission, hiding backstage playing guitar and singing in lady voices. This 1977 film provides the essence of Calvin and Ruby's endearing, albeit peculiar reality.

In regards to my own artist environment, I probably won't get my security deposit back due to all the nail holes and paint splatters. But blank walls make me uncomfortable, and my hands like to keep busy, so my home is naturally covered in arts and crafts. I imagine that many artists—not just those pegged as folk artists—experience a similar distaste for environmental emptiness and choose to gradually resolve the issue by hand, some more obsessively than others.

Inside/Outside: Artist Environments is on view at the Museum of Craft and Folk Art through May 24th, 2009.

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