



A visit to Santa Monica Pier is as much a matter of sound as it is of the sights – from the bright carousel organ to the clatter of pinball machines.

During the last four months, however, Santa Monica sculptor Carl Cheng has been fashioning a visual island of quiet for pier goers – an electronically operated public art project called the Natural Museum of Modern Arm.

The project gives the effect of an indoor desert behind its large picture windows, through which onlookers watch a series of natural objects sketch every varying patterns on a two-inch layer of sand.

Viewers, whether they activate the coin-operated mechanical sculpture themselves or watch while Cheng tinkers with it, never can second-guess what pattern the sand will take when the steel bar above it sweeps a row of objects from the desert and the beach over its surface.

Perhaps the sea urchin shell at one end of the bar will give the sand a rounded line beside the jagged indentations left by clusters of cactus tips. Pieces of Aspen wood leave a more subtle design on the sand during the metal bar's next journey across the sand.

Each sweep of the bar adds new dimensions to the scene, until it is smoothed for a fresh series of impressions.

Under Cheng's soft white spotlights mounted on the display's black walls, the 20 by 20-foot "desert" represents a long-term desire to add a piece of artwork to the attractions at the pier.

While teaching a course in public art at Otis Art Institute earlier this year, Cheng said that he learned that the space at the pier would be available for a few months and decided to experiment there. Should he be able to obtain a grant for a permanent exhibition, Cheng hopes to refine the project as a free-standing display.

Cheng believes it's important for art to be made readily available to the public instead of confining it to museums and galleries. In keeping with this feeling, he produces his sculpture works under the name John Doe Co.

"If you talk about Paris, what you know about it is through the museums, the art, all the monuments," Cheng remarked. "That's what makes the city. But you come over here and we're about to have nothing but commercial things. Why should the pier be just commercial?"

Cheng said the reaction to his "natural museum," which he is still refining, has ranged from ready acceptance to disinterest.

To him, the project is a creative way to remind viewers of the local environment, which serves as the focal point of much of Cheng's work.

"Working in public areas, I use the environment to tell me what to do," explained the soft-spoken UCLA graduate, whose works have been exhibited in galleries throughout the county.

Sand, being a primary element near the pier, seemed like a logical medium for the work. It's also an important component of Southern California's total environment, Cheng noted.

"Southern California is like a desert," he observed. "You know how it turns real sandy and dry, with little shrubs. That's what our environment really is. When I work with this I hope it reminds people that this is where we are. We brought in water and all the rest of what we have here, but if we stopped manicuring it and repaving all the roads it would turn right back into that."

For Cheng, who likes to present the natural environment through the use of technology and electronics in his sculpture, such a reminder isn't meant as a criticism of development.

"It's not necessarily bad that we've changed the environment," observed Cheng, who holds a bachelor's degree in industrial design as well as a master's degree in art. "I just think that we should be aware of it. If you're aware of the thing, you'll be more selective and more sensitive about how you use what you've got."