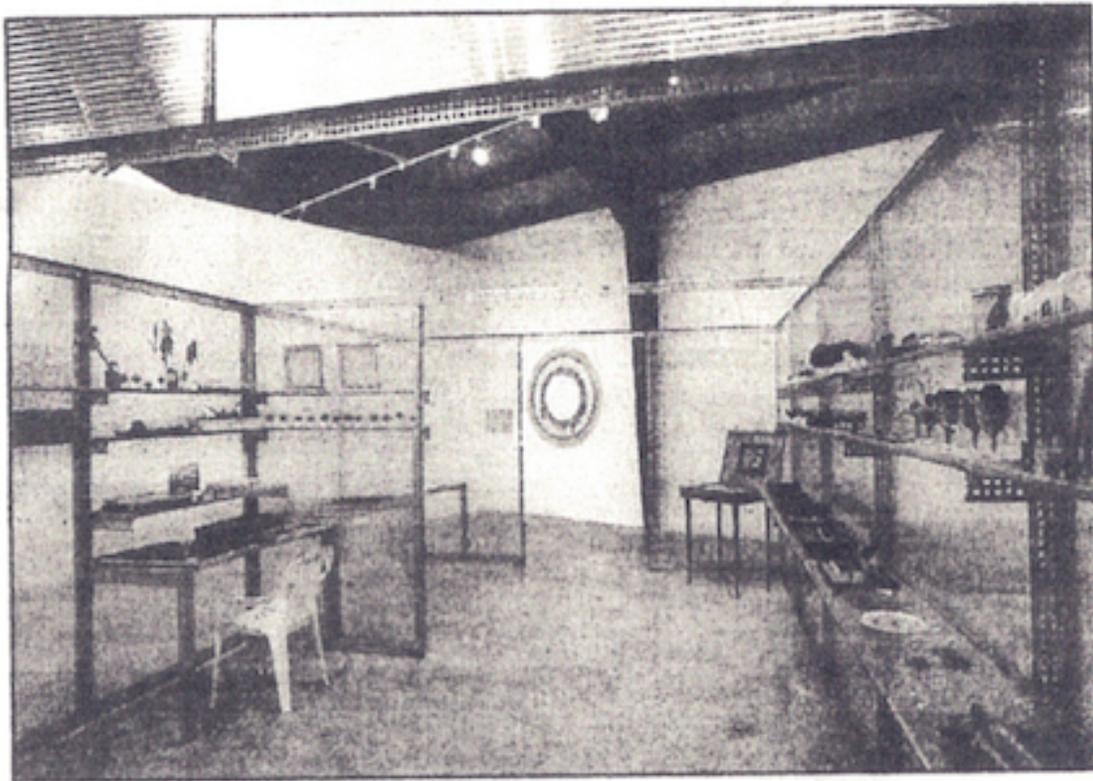


Installations Give the Senses a Workout

Art Review

By WILLIAM WILSON
TIMES ART CRITIC



Courtesy Santa Monica Museum of Art

Four projects at the Santa Monica Museum of Art prove that late-20th century aesthetics really are a modern update of the sensational Baroque. Since gallery-size installations appeal by exciting palpable feeling, there's nothing boring about offerings by Amy Drezner, Carl Cheng, Michael C. McMillen and Jennifer Steinkamp.

The latter three sail under a windy title, "Public Works—A Community Laboratory: Celebrating Grantmaking by the California Community Foundation J. Paul Getty Trust Fund for the Visual Arts." If all that institutional verbiage makes the boat list a bit, at least it's in the service of an admirable support program.

Carl Cheng's offering was a relief. "Organic Laboratory Museum John Doe Co." offers a pristine white gallery sheltering a serene small bungalow-shaped translucent glass greenhouse. A sign on the door identifies the matters at hand as "Avocados & Wax."

The latter substance appears as part of a mechanical contraption at the rear of the space. A squat T-shape, the machine's upright revolves the horizontal part where a container of molten wax travels slowly back and forth patiently dripping the colored liquid. It lands on a flat base, eventually forming a ring about 3 feet in diameter.

Philip Martin Gallery

Previous results hang on outside gallery walls. Kenneth Noland's target paintings from the days of Color Stain Minimalism come to mind. Cheng's results have similar zones of color melting gracefully into one another, but wax is more luscious than paint. Pieces look edible, like some glorious modernist pastry, exquisitely exotic and refined. At the same time they're as reassuringly unforced as the aurora borealis.

Back in the lab, Cheng's avocados are little miracles of ingenuity. Skins are transformed into everything from balls to fabric that looks like leather. Dried seeds bear simple incisions, with results that waft us back through millennia to the dawn of human art. Cheng's wonderful work is an object lesson in what it means to imitate nature: You don't copy, you collaborate.