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Glowing in the dark



Mel Melcon, Los Angeles Times

FLIP THE SWITCH: *Chris Burden's lamp sculpture against the backdrop of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum.*

Artist Chris Burden's collection of restored streetlights will cast LACMA in 'Urban Light.'

By Susan Freudenheim, Special to The Times

"I'VE been driving by these buildings for 40 years, and it's always bugged me how this institution turned its back on the city," Chris Burden said the other day as he sat in a new public plaza facing Wilshire Boulevard at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Linking the soon-to-open Broad Contemporary Art Museum and the museum's original campus, this plaza is taking shape as the setting for Burden's largest sculpture to date, "Urban Light," an installation of 202 restored and fully operational vintage streetlights.

Wilshire is one of the main thoroughfares of the city, but LACMA's multiple tall, imposing and mostly unadorned facades have done little to address the endless stream of traffic that flows by, Burden noted. There's nothing like the grand Beaux Arts entry staircase that serves as a meeting

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place and a lure for visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. "What faces Wilshire," Burden said, "hasn't been very inviting."

The opening of the BCAM, designed by Renzo Piano to hold contemporary art, will mark a new beginning for the 42-year-old museum, and Burden, 61, hopes that his monumental installation of 1920s and '30s-era lamps will become both a city landmark and a more fitting entryway to the sprawling campus. Nearly all of Burden's cast-iron lamps once lighted the streets of this region, and their variety in a very literal way represents distinct styles that distinguish different neighborhoods -- present and past. Arranged so the visitor can walk among the fixtures, "Urban Light" is a nod, Burden said, to what a museum should be: "It sounds kind of corny, but when you walk through the lamps into the museum, it's like a pathway to enlightenment. It's symbolic."

Arranged in strict formation, with the tallest standing about 30 feet in the center at the back, flanked by others of various heights and forms, with the smallest standing about 20 feet tall, the lamps look like a platoon of soldiers ready to march. All their parts are original, collected by Burden over seven years. The bases display elaborate floral and geometric patterns, and the fluted shafts and glass globes that cap them have been meticulously cleaned, painted and refurbished to create an exuberant glow. The first lighting is scheduled for Feb. 7 as one of BCAM's kick-off events, and "Urban Light" will illuminate mid-Wilshire's evening sky regularly thereafter.



Chris Burden began buying vintage streetlights from swap meets and formed an installation at his own studio in Topanga Canyon. A representative of LACMA saw the installation there and commissioned "Urban Lights," which forms a new entryway for the museum.

A fanatical collector

Burden found his first lamps on a trip to the monthly Rose Bowl Flea Market in December 2000.

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Although he may still be best known for his provocative conceptual art from the 1970s, including having himself shot in the arm as a performance piece, he has been making large-scale assemblage sculpture for the last three decades. He is also an avaricious collector: Trains (toy and full-sized), cars (real and miniature), Erector sets and oriental rugs are just a few of the categories that he has amassed in vast quantities, either with a design in mind for specific artworks or with a vague notion of future use

Lamps had been on his mind as well -- he liked the forms -- and he'd been eyeing reproductions at Home Depot. So seeing "the real thing," as he put it, a couple of worn lamp shafts lying on the ground, grabbed him. He quickly asked the price: "They're \$950 each," Burden remembers the dealer telling him, which he then bargained down to \$800 if Burden would take the pair.

"I whipped out my checkbook and wrote him a check for \$1,600," Burden said. He asked if there were more and was told "maybe." It was the beginning of a cat-and-mouse relationship in a subculture of fanatical collectors who care deeply about cast iron and see the beauty in preserving pieces of the past, and whose interest keeps prices steadily rising.

Burden didn't have a plan for the lamps at first, though he said that after he'd gotten about six he knew they would become part of his art. The number grew to 70, then 100 and onward, and the lamp obsession seemed unstoppable.

Some of the lamps were mostly intact -- though always needing some repair -- but more often Burden turned up stray parts, which he, his crew and a group of lighting experts he came to know reassembled and wired into working lamps. Over the years the landscape surrounding Burden's Topanga Canyon studio became dotted with what he calls "lamp carcasses" in varying states of disrepair, pole upon pole lying flat on the ground waiting to be renewed and reused.

He chose to paint them all a neutral gray, giving the variety a modicum of uniformity, and he imagined placing them in minimal arrangements. They became, at his hand, the ready-made material for large-scale installation art.

For a solo show at New York's Gagosian Gallery in late 2003, Burden suggested installing more than 100 of the lamps inside the Chelsea space, creating a "forest of lamps," a series of lamp-filled rooms that would represent "bringing L.A. light and culture to New York."

The show would have been big and expensive, and it had a tight timeline, so eventually the gallery decided against it, even though Burden said it had invested heavily in the project. That left him with about 150 lamps, many at least partially restored, and no immediate plan for them.

He decided to install them at his studio, placing them in orderly rows set in concrete on the exterior periphery of his hangar-like studio.

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Still, Burden wanted to show the lamps, and in late 2006, 14 of them traveled to London for an exhibition. But the real goal was to keep as many as possible together, and he began to invite people to visit the studio, turning the lights on at night to display their luminescence but showing the installation during the day as well. Burden loved the lamps' craftsmanship and history -- the tallest and most ornate came from downtown Los Angeles, others from Anaheim, Glendale, Hollywood and a few from Portland, Ore., according to Anna Justice, a specialized contractor who is working on the LACMA installation and who sold about 60 lamps to Burden.



The 202 light poles in the "Urban Lights" installation vary in height and come mostly from cities in Southern California.

Plenty of suitors

Among the many Topanga visitors was Stephanie Barron, LACMA's senior curator of modern art, who has helped acquire and exhibit Burden's work for the museum for decades. Anticipating LACMA's 2008 expansion, Barron encouraged others at the museum to visit the Topanga studio, and when Michael Govan became LACMA director in spring 2006 -- fresh from the Dia Art Foundation in New York, which specializes in large-scale contemporary installations -- Barron suggested Govan go up to scope it out.

"Very soon into being here I went to Topanga Canyon," Govan said in a recent interview. "It was twilight, and the lights were lit, and I didn't even have to get up the drive. It was so obvious." He wanted to buy the work on the spot -- not an easy thing for a county-owned museum with limited acquisition funds and a committee that needs to review purchases. There was motivation to be quick too. The MAK Museum for Applied Art in Vienna, which had previously organized a major Burden retrospective, had dibs on the lamps, intending to bring them to Austria.

"I said, 'No way,' " Govan remembered. "On many levels it was clear that it was perfect for LACMA. It had architectonic scale, it would draw people into the campus, it would give us a

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sense of place." "Urban Light" comprised Los Angeles' history and diversity, Govan said, and it was by a major L.A. artist.

Govan went to work and invited Burden to talk to his board. Andrew M. Gordon, head of Goldman Sachs & Co. Investment Banking Division on the West Coast and a leader at the museum (in October, Gordon became chairman of the LACMA board), saw the presentation and went to the studio with his wife, Amy.

"We were blown away," Gordon said. Although the couple had not been big "contemporary art participants," Gordon said, they decided to buy a work consisting of 150 lamps for the museum for an unnamed price through the Gordon Family Foundation. Burden, seeing the harmony in keeping the lamps in L.A., agreed.

Once he started planning the lamps' configuration at LACMA, though, "I realized they had to have more of them," Burden said.

He still owned 52 more lamps, but adding such a large number to the project raised the price, not only of the sculpture itself but also of the complex installation. Each lamp has to be installed to code, and the production is being overseen by experts from the city's Bureau of Street Lighting as well as an elaborate array of specialized contractors.

Burden made his request to vastly expand the project with no assurance that it would happen. Govan, who agreed immediately, says, "The Gordons came through in an incredibly gracious way."

The experience of looking carefully at "Urban Light" as a work of art, exploring the details of the individual objects, has the added benefit of making other similar city lamps still in operation suddenly stand out. And their forgotten beauty -- both in Burden's lamps and on the streets -- is a pleasure to discover. "All that detail in the casting is what I wanted people to look at," Burden said.

But Burden also sees in "Urban Light" something grander -- "architecture without walls."

"It's a folly," Burden said, an extravagant, grand and deeply meaningful gesture about Los Angeles' past -- complex, finely crafted and made to last.

For his part, Govan sees in "Urban Light" echoes of a Roman temple or colonnade without walls that is also a collection of representatives of all the communities of Los Angeles County -- appropriate for the county's art museum. The work will, Govan hopes, allow museum entrants to participate in "a coming together of this dispersed county into a concentrated symbol of light."

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And that is, he said, "much better than a red carpet."



Artist Chris Burden created "Urban Lights," a sculpture for the new entryway to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It consists of 202 vintage streetlights from Los Angeles and other cities.

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