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In Los Angeles, Art That's Worth the Detour



Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

URBAN LIGHT This lamppost installation by Chris Burden at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art has become a favorite site for motorists and photographers. [More Photos >](#)

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LOS ANGELES

AT night, it's bright enough to stop traffic. One minute cars are buzzing along Wilshire Boulevard between Fairfax and La Brea. The next they slow to a crawl, even though the stoplight is green. The attraction? An art installation consisting of some 200 salvaged cast-iron lampposts from the 1920s and '30s arranged in formation at the new entrance of the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#). Come dusk, the lamps turn on and create a sort of flying carpet of light.

Chris Burden, the artist who created the installation, "Urban Light," has compared his work to an open-air building, about the size of his studio. The museum's director, Michael Govan, has compared it to the Parthenon. It is, in any event, art on the scale of architecture. And since its introduction last year, it has become a leading example of a type of public art growing more prominent in Los Angeles: art you don't have to leave the comfort of your convertible to experience.

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Although downtown Los Angeles still boasts the city's densest concentration of traditional public art — the sort of sculpture that dresses up corporate lobbies and courtyards — less likely spots in the greater metropolitan area have become home to what one could call drive-by art. A casual tour shows that this art takes many forms, going well beyond the celebrated mural tradition long associated with the city.

Two years ago, the Japanese artist [Yayoi Kusama](#) planted a bed of overgrown, colorful fiberglass and ceramic tulips in a Beverly Hills park, visible from Santa Monica Boulevard and Rodeo Drive. Last year, the American artists [Cindy Sherman](#) and Barbara Kruger infiltrated the Sunset Strip among other locations with billboards (in Ms. Kruger's case, a video billboard), temporarily inserting their works into a thicket of movie ads, marquees, placards and other signage. This winter, the New York artist Jacob Hashimoto unveiled an aluminum-tile, tapestrylike sculpture made for the facade of the Andaz Hotel in West Hollywood, while the ubiquitous street artist [Shepard Fairey](#) created a huge mural of [Lance Armstrong](#) on the side of the Montalban Theater in Los Angeles to kick off the cyclist's coming Nike-sponsored benefit project with various A-list artists.

And this month, the Italian-born, California-based artist Piero Golia is placing an aluminum sphere atop the Standard Hotel, also in West Hollywood. The sphere will light up whenever Mr. Golia is in town and go dark when he is not — providing, he said, “a secret communication code” for friends curious about his whereabouts and something of a cipher for passers-by. “Maybe a commuter who drives past it every day will decide that it lights up on sunny days, or on rainy days — it's a form open to urban legend,” Mr. Golia added.

The globe should, he said, be visible from several blocks away. “I think in a way more or less everybody will see it, but I don't know who will notice it.”

The globe is not the only artwork here designed to make drivers do a double-take in their rear-view mirror. While some public artworks announce themselves prominently, in the spirit of the Hollywood sign perched high above the city or Simon Rodia's soaring monuments of Watts Towers, others, like Mr. Golia's, are in a sense camouflaged by their surroundings. They are artistic gestures that can blend into or complicate their environments, more along the lines of Tony DeLap's powerful but often unnoticed steel beam from 1990 that arches over Wilshire Boulevard where Santa Monica borders Brentwood. Such artworks can be mistaken for architectural elements, city infrastructure, signage or advertising. (Or, as with Mr. Fairey's new mural, which sports a small Nike logo, the projects can visibly bridge art and commerce from the start.)

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This sort of ambiguity creates a challenge for anyone working on public art projects in the urban sprawl that is Los Angeles. “How do you insert contemporary art into a landscape already saturated with so many commercial signs?” asked Emi Fontana, a former Milan gallerist who commissioned the projects by Ms. Sherman and Ms. Kruger last year under the auspices of her nonprofit public art firm, West of Rome.

She compares today’s driver in Los Angeles to the flâneur in Baudelaire’s Paris — the poetic soul who strolls through a city in order to take it all in. “The difference with cars,” she said, “is that the speed changes the aesthetic experience of the city. Instead of Baudelaire’s city of modernity, L.A. is really a city of supermodernity.”

In the case of Ms. Sherman billboards, which featured Hollywood-inspired images from the artist’s celebrated “Untitled Film Stills” series and were placed near actual movie billboards, the line between art and entertainment was deliberately blurred. With Ms. Kruger’s video, which ended with a visual message to “please stop texting” (before the state passed a law to this effect), the artist co-opted a bold direct-address technique associated with advertising to make motorists sit up.

Lauri Firstenberg, the curator who facilitated Mr. Golia’s project through her nonprofit gallery LAX Art, has also worked with artists drawn to billboards “as a mode of public address; they’re interested in playing with the language of advertising,” she said. She has produced temporary billboards by Mark Bradford, Daniel Joseph Martinez, Ruben Ochoa and other artists who seek to reach beyond the typical gallery audience.

Multimedia



[Slide Show](#)

Drive-By Art

More recently, she produced a billboard by Raymond Pettibon, still up on Sunset Boulevard, featuring his 1989 drawing of a man walking, hunched over, away from the viewer. Above him the text reads, “I thought California would be different.”

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Ms. Firstenberg said that Los Angeles was only now finding its footing in terms of public art. “There is still so much that can be done here,” she said. “I think aside from the muralist tradition, the history of public art here is just not as rich or ripe as New York, Chicago, Paris or London.”

New York, for example, had a wealth of public art (mainly monuments commemorating civic leaders and Civil War heroes) before it had a wealth of museums. And the city now has two major nonprofit groups in this sphere, [Public Art Fund](#) and Creative Time. Founded in the 1970s, both have raised money for artists’ projects, lobbied politicians and worked within municipal building codes for decades.

Los Angeles does not have equivalent organizations. But the city has a “one percent for art” program, overseen by the Department of Cultural Affairs, that requires developers of large projects to spend a fraction of their buildings’ value on art. And it has a new crop of contemporary art curators like Ms. Firstenberg and Ms. Fontana who are willing to work within the system, however bureaucratic. It has, for instance, taken Mr. Golia’s team of engineers and architects two years and several plan revisions to meet local building codes, turning Ms. Firstenberg, in her own estimation, from “an idealist into a realist.”

Another major player is Merry Norris, an art consultant who says that her commissions can run over five years “with many starts and stops.” She oversaw the Hashimoto sculpture for the Andaz hotel as well as a 2007 April Greiman mural (of a super-sized bowl of rice) on the facade of a building in Koreatown, typically working with developers under the “one percent” program. She credits this municipal fee with “raising the level of activity” and “opening up numerous possibilities” for public art in the city.

Meanwhile, For Your Art, an event producer and public relations firm, is busy plotting out public art offerings for a new online map ([foryourart.com](#)). Bettina Korek, the founder of For Your Art, said she favored an online, easy-to-update format because the public art landscape evolves so quickly. She also spoke of organizing an event in June at the Kusama tulip sculpture to coincide with the Gagosian Gallery’s bicoastal show of the artist. “We should all think of these sites,” she said, “as places to hold events, to gather, to meet.”

Of course, for some working in this realm, getting Angelenos to leave their cars is the ultimate sign of success. By that measure, Mr. Burden’s “Urban Light” installation could already be considered a blockbuster. Cyclists use it as a meeting point; tourists use it as a place to pose. The museum found so many images of it cropping up on Flickr that it organized its own amateur photography contest this winter.

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But Mr. Burden shares credit for the work's appeal, surmising that viewers are drawn to the ornate lamppost designs from Los Angeles in the 1920s and '30s out of nostalgia for a more optimistic period in California history.

“There was just no need to put this much work into a fixture when a telephone pole and a wooden arm would have done the trick,” he said. “To me the lamps are a form of public art in themselves, making the infrastructure of the city so rich with design and ornamentation.”