

# A Forest Among High-Rises

*Ernst & Young Plaza Exhibit Holds Trees Built Out of Anything But Wood*

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Downtown's Ernst & Young Plaza is a collection of park benches and jacaranda trees tucked away beneath the sheer walls of the office towers at Seventh and Figueroa streets. On a typical sunny weekday, the plaza acts as a haven for lunching office workers. But recently, this

## ART BEAT

swath of pavement, which also serves as the somewhat picturesque portal to the 7+Fig shopping mall, has held a surprising addition: It sprouted a forest.

*El Bosque* (Spanish for *The Forest*) is an installation of tree-like sculptures intended to protest worldwide deforestation. The project, the brainchild of artist Naomi Siegmann, asks viewers to consider what a world without trees would look like. Siegmann invited 15 artists from the United States and Mexico to create a "tree" using any material except wood.

The results range from Siegmann's "Stand In," a bright green, three-dimensional steel sculpture reminiscent of a child's drawing of a tree, to Bryan Nash Gill's "Dendriform," which resembles a horizontal slice of an old-growth tree — except that its "rings" are created out of rusty chainsaw chains.

The decision not to use wood has ominous undertones, Siegmann explained by phone from her home in Mexico City. With its steel, fiberglass and aluminum trees, *El Bosque* represents the over-harvested and woodless forest of the future.

"If we used wood it would be against the entire concept of a bare forest," Siegmann explained.

Nash Gill typically works in wood. Siegmann's stipulation forced him to look beyond his usual medium to the tools he uses to manipulate it.

"I had a lot of used chains around my studio and so I started welding them together," the Connecticut-based sculptor explained. "They ended up forming this circle, which kept

growing larger and larger and then the idea came — that it's very similar to growth rings. It alludes to the destructive power of man."

For the past 13 months, the installation has traveled throughout Mexico, making stops in San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas, Mexico City and Oaxaca. Then, *El Bosque* crossed the border and visited San Antonio, Santa Fe and now Los Angeles. At the end of the month it will move to San Francisco's Yerba Buena Gardens.

On a recent visit to the Plaza, the unexpected and decidedly unnatural grove stopped several curious passersby in their tracks. A business suit-clad man manipulated his cell phone while examining Helen Escobedo's "The Rubbery Tree," a palm tree-shaped sculpture with pieces of used bike tires for fronds. A mother and daughter climbed the Plaza's small grassy hill to get a closer peek at "Roots," Steve Tobin's sculpture of a root structure rendered in fire engine-red bronze.

Siegmann sought outdoor venues that double as walkways, or "crossroads" as she called them, for optimum viewing. When she came to Los Angeles to help install the works, she counted roughly 500 pedestrians in the Plaza on one day.

### Tapping the Magazine

The idea for *El Bosque* grew out of a trip Siegmann took to southern Mexico almost 20 years ago and the shocking scene she discovered there.

"I went to Palenque and the mountains were bare. All I saw were the stumps of the trees and I was horrified," she recalled. "I came back and I spoke to the forestry people here and asked why isn't something being done?"

She was told that a reforestation program did in fact exist, but nobody paid attention to it. She remembers the forestry representative saying, "Well, that's life."

Realizing that the Mexican government was not going to do anything, Siegmann took the matter into her own hands. After letting the idea "germinate," to use Siegmann's word,



photo by Carlos Alcazar

Steve Tobin's "Roots" is one of 15 sculptures on display in Ernst & Young Plaza as part of the exhibit *El Bosque*. The "trees" are made from materials including chainsaw chains and used bicycle tires.

she contacted a few sculptors that she knew in Mexico, who agreed to be part of the project.

Finding American artists was a bit trickier for the New York City-born Siegmann, who had lived in Mexico for more than 40 years. So she turned to her monthly subscription of *Sculpture* magazine. As she leafed through the pages, she kept track of all of the artists whose work involved nature. Then, she contacted the artists, including Robert Lobe, Catherine Widgery, Nash Gill and Tobin. The reception was enthusiastic.

"I thought it was a great idea," Nash Gill said. "Not only the fact that she was directly addressing the rainforest, but it's a global problem too."

*El Bosque* is on view through May 30 at Ernst & Young Plaza, 725 S. Figueroa St., [elbosque-theforest.arteven.com](http://elbosque-theforest.arteven.com).

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