

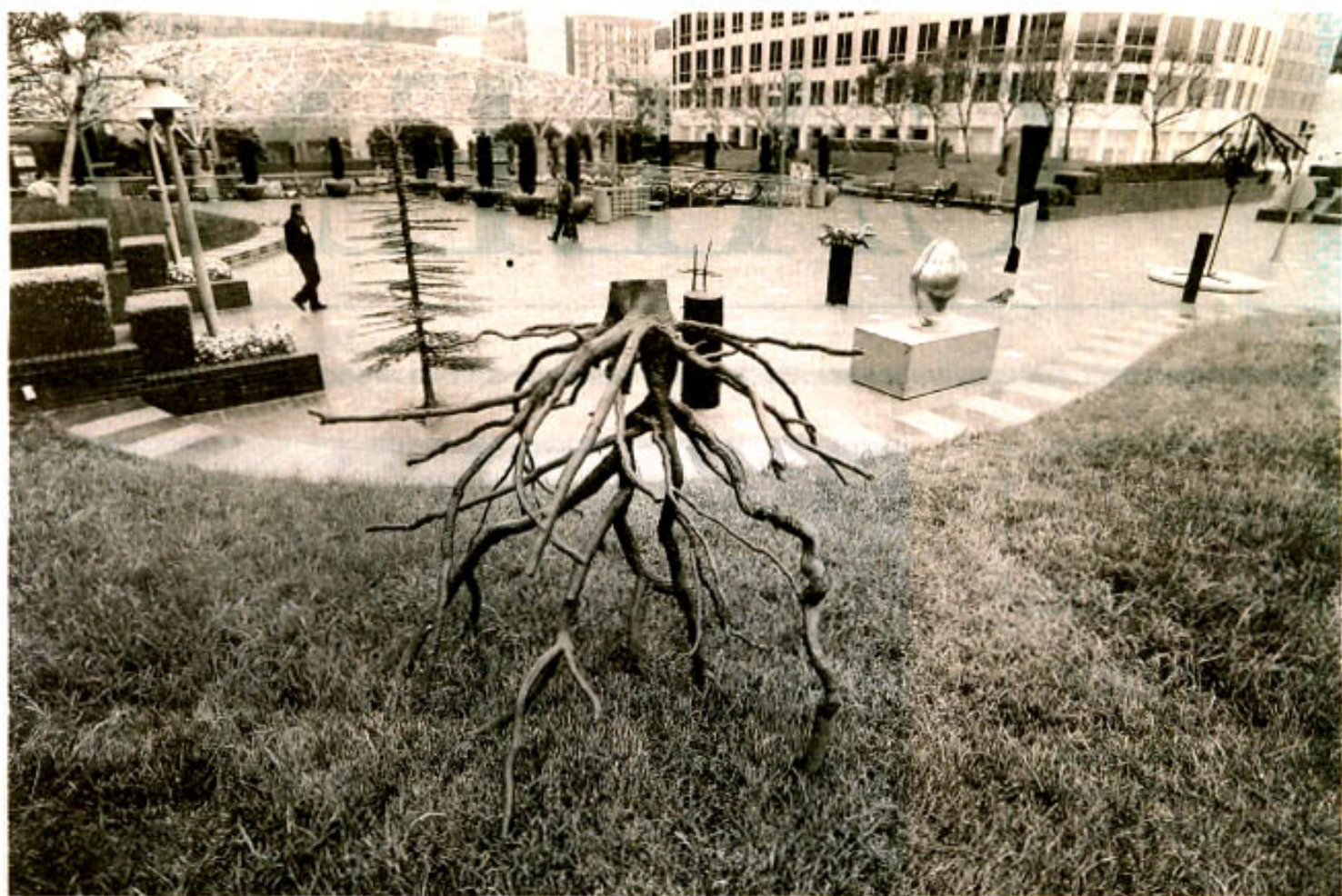
Los Angeles Times

CALENDAR

E
Arts
Entertainment
Style
Culture

Friday, May 5, 2006

calendarlive.com



KEN HIVELY/Los Angeles Times

SCULPTURE IN 'TREES': "El Bosque" is a temporary public art installation at Ernst & Young Plaza.

Can't see the forest

Artist Naomi Siegmann's installation seeks awareness of world deforestation.

By ALEX CHUN
Special to The Times

"El Bosque" ("The Forest,") an installation of tree-themed sculptures made of resin, aluminum, bronze, steel — anything but wood — has sprung up this week at Ernst & Young Plaza downtown.

Why no wood? "If the forests are disappearing, there will be no wood, and this may be our future forest," says artist Naomi Siegmann, whose brainchild the project is.

The 15 "trees" made by artists from Mexico and the U.S. are Siegmann's response to the deforestation she viewed firsthand in the early 1980s while vacationing in Palenque, Mexico.

"I was stunned — the mountains were bare from cutting, and all that was left were the stumps," she says. Back in Mexico City, where the Forest Hills, N.Y., native has lived since 1963, she called the Mexican forestry

service and was told that although a reforestation program existed, "nobody paid attention to it."

Over time, the idea for an art project to be shown outdoors in public spaces took root. "I knew I wanted this project to be international," she says, "to drive home the point that deforestation is not just a Mexican concern, but an international concern."

She contacted artists on both sides of the border, and the resulting installation includes works by Helen Escobedo, Steve Tobin, Catherine Widgery and Beverly Pepper — no small feat for Siegmann, who acknowledges she herself has no particular prominence as an artist.

Now 72, Siegmann showed her work at Mexico City's Museo de Arte Moderno in the 1970s and caught the eye of Escobedo — who lives in both Mexico City and Berlin, and was then director of museums and galleries for the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

The two became friends, and since then Siegmann has become "well known in the art community" in Mexico, Escobedo says by e-mail from Berlin.

For "El Bosque," Escobedo says, "I was eager to contribute a tree made from waste materials, namely ... old metal piping, a large unused umbrella and discarded bicycle tires."

"Oddly," she adds, "it ended up looking very much like a tired old palm tree."

With her contacts in Mexico, Siegmann had little difficulty persuading artists there to sign on for the project. Among the other Mexico-based artists in the show are Yolanda Gutiérrez, Marina Lascaris, Kiyoto Ota, Marta Palau, Pedro Friedeberg, Ricardo Regazzoni and Jorge Yazpik.

Bringing in artists from the U.S. was another matter. Other than her sister, Caroline Kapiowitz of Long Island, N.Y., who contributed a tree made from handsaws, Siegmann didn't know any American artists. With the help of Escobedo, however, she was able to secure Pepper, who created a 9-foot-tall carbon steel wedge-shaped tree symbolizing an ax.

For the rest, Siegmann turned to back issues of Sculpture magazine, scouring the pages for artists whose work related to nature. She circled four

names, and to her surprise, all said yes to her pitch: Bryan Nash Gill, Robert Lobe, Widgery and Tobin.

"Anything that can heighten our awareness to the ongoing tragedies of old trees being cut down and slash and burn [agriculture] is worthwhile," says Widgery, who created a series of resin and steel tripod structures meant to "represent roots out of the ground and the violence against trees."

"I also like the idea of crossing national boundaries since deforestation is happening all over the world," adds Widgery, who splits her time between Truro, Mass., and Guatemala.

The installation began its 18-month tour last summer in Mexico, with stops in San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Oaxaca and Mexico City. It moved to the Mexican Cultural Institute in San Antonio, Texas, earlier this year and then to St. John's College in Santa Fe, N.M.

The sculptures will remain in L.A. through May 30, then will travel to San Francisco's Yerba Buena Gardens from June 16 through July 5 before returning to Mexico to take up residence in a private collection.