

For Creative Kids, It's a Great Place to Hang

Let loose in a LACMA gallery, students transform the neutral space into a lively, masterpiece showcase.

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Seven 11th-graders from Fairfax High School sat on the floor of a gallery at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art just over three months ago and talked about how they could change that world.

The museum had invited the students to turn a staid gallery with 22 masterpiece paintings and sculptures into a wholly different, more exciting environment. The art was mostly mid-20th century Modernist works by blue-chip artists, among them Piet Mondrian, Rene Magritte, Isamu Noguchi, Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell. It is the kind of work most 16- and 17-year-olds know only from textbooks, if at all, so these students, all but one of them from Fairfax High's art magnet program, had to learn everything about these works on the fly.

Reinstalling a major gallery in a major museum is not an incidental task, but these seven had no fear of what they didn't know. In the gallery today, the students have clearly made their mark. The classic off-white walls and dark-wood display cases are gone. The sound of upbeat jazz resonates throughout. Text-covered bus benches placed at the center of the gallery offer relief to tired visitors. Mirrored walls sport silhouettes of cityscapes, and the art is everywhere--hanging from the ceiling like billboards, standing on pedestals in the center of the room, displayed in spiffy, new plexiglass cases. Instead of a neutral environment, the students created a metaphorical city, a lively place where art is inextricable from life.

So radical is the change from all the galleries that surround the students' work that visitors cannot but stop and wonder what's up, and that's just the point. LACMA hopes to find out how such a different kind of place will affect the museum experience, for better or for worse.

"In the museum world right now, there's lots of debate about how to install works of art," said Stephanie Barron, LACMA's vice president for education and public programs and senior curator of Modern and contemporary art. She spoke late last week at a reception for the students in the gallery they'd rearranged. "I encouraged these students not to think just of this gallery, but that they were participating in the debate of how we look at works of art."

Such inquiries into new ways of looking at museum galleries have been undertaken by other museums, notably the Tate Gallery in London, and are part of a campaign to attract and engage new audiences to look at museums' permanent holdings. Much lies in the balance in such attempts, as the cost of blockbuster exhibitions explode and audiences remain difficult to attract.

The students' gallery makeover was an extension of the museum's education program known as LACMALab, an experimental program that invites artists to engage with the museum and with young audiences. In this case, the collaboration with Fairfax High was conceived by L.A.-based conceptual artist Michael Asher. Well known for work that

challenges the practices of art museums, Asher felt that 11th-graders would be smart enough to be creative and not yet sophisticated enough to be inhibited by traditional museum methods.

The students had to commit two afternoons a week for the last three months of the school year, without credit or pay. They were given a budget of \$5,000 for materials and expenses and were told they had to work with the museum's staff to ensure that the art would be safe and treated respectfully. They also had to include all the artworks already in the gallery room in their new arrangement.

Beyond that, they could change as much as they wanted.

"The artworks were there," said student Daniel Madrigal. "Our job was just to do it differently." One of his ideas was to expose the backs of some of the paintings, which are normally hidden when hung on the wall. Initially, he was told there would be nothing to see. Undaunted, Madrigal insisted, and indeed, when the staff revealed the backs of two works--Magritte's "The Treachery of Images (This Is Not a Pipe)," from 1928-29, and Mondrian's "Composition in White Red and Yellow," 1938--all sorts of labels documenting the work's exhibition history and previous owners were there.

The students were thrilled by the discovery and insisted that such revelations make the works more interesting. Now the Magritte and Mondrian are encased in transparent plastic boxes, front and back revealed.

Another student, Hannah J Koh, wanted walls with mirrors. "I was very stubborn about the mirror idea," she said. "The mirrors expand the dimensions of the art, and this gallery is the beginning of the expansion." The mirrors reflect the space's lighting and the artworks' refracted images, making the gallery a more complex, jarring space.

The students' installation, artist Asher said, turns some long-held assumptions about presenting art upside down. "It reminds us that the myth of the [gallery as] white cube is certainly a myth," he said. "The idea that a work of art can't go on a wall that has other elements on it isn't true."

Their tactics came from instinct, not schooling, although as art students who have visited their share of museums, they were not entirely naive, Asher said. "They know a lot about what they did."

LACMA put some of its finest artworks on the line for the project, at Barron's insistence. Indeed Magritte's "The Treachery of Images" is arguably the museum's most famous painting. The results, she said, exceeded her expectations.

"I said from the start, if we were going to do this, they should have the best work the museum had to offer." She told the students about vistas leading into the gallery, about the need to show the work to its best advantage. She told them that they needed to be sure that their installation would augment the visitor's experience of the art.

"I told them this has to work even when you kids go away," she said.

The students' installation is due to be taken down in September, Barron said, but she's now reconsidering what to do with the space.

"I may keep it up.... I'm not going to be in a hurry to take it down. It's a little dull to put it back to the way it was, don't you think?"