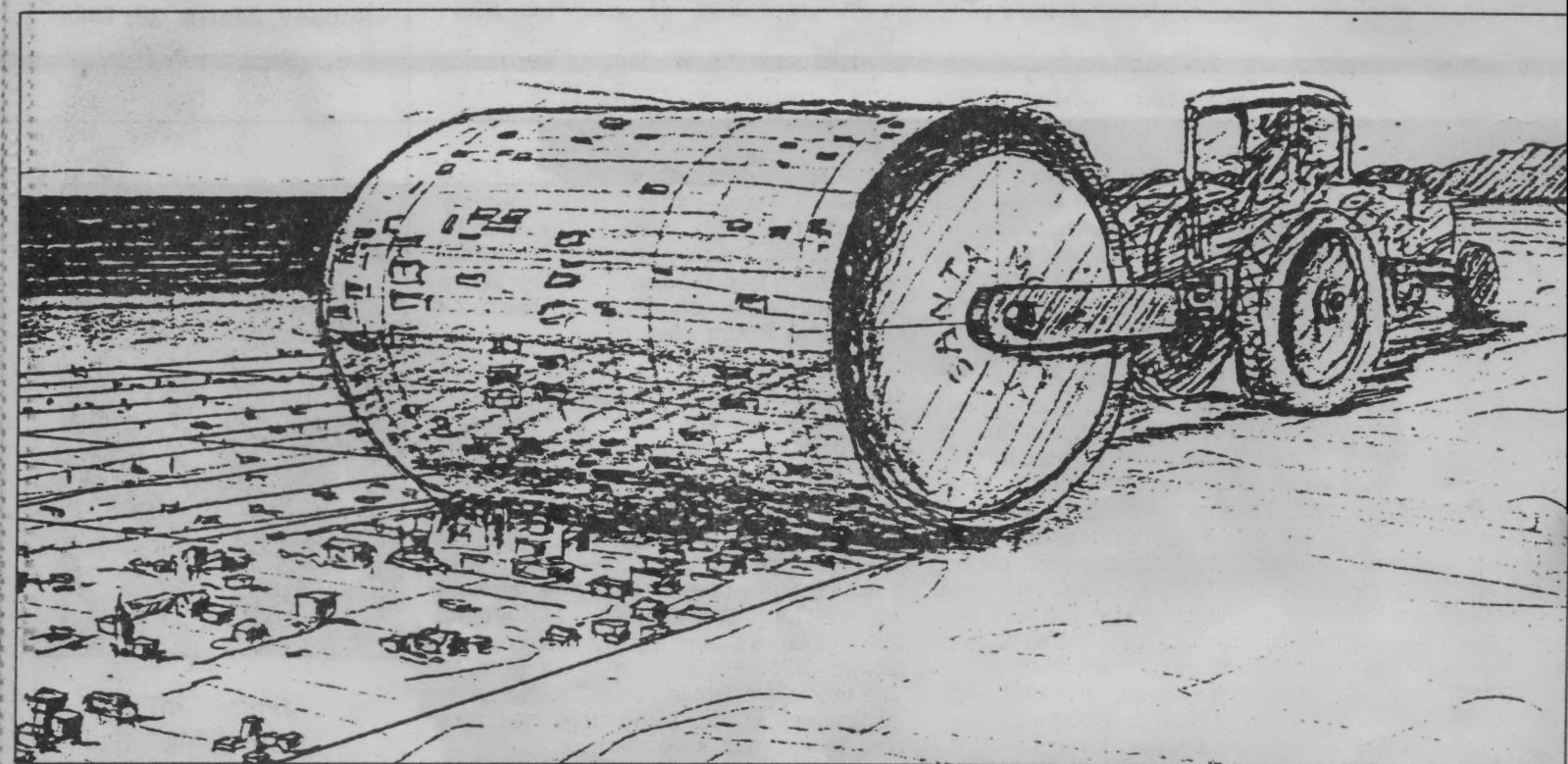


ART



CARL CHENG

Sculptor Carl Cheng's sketch of his "Walk on LA" — a huge roller with impressions cast into its concrete face that will stamp out sand-modeled buildings in Santa Monica on March 27.

The sheer spectacle gets center stage

And traditional artwork finds itself being bumped

Next Sunday at 3 p.m., a tractor will rumble along the beach at Santa Monica, pulling behind it a 12-ton roller. The brainchild of sculptor Carl Cheng, the huge roller will function — if all goes well — as an "art school," stamping out sand-modeled buildings from impressions cast into its concrete face.

Cheng envisions a whole beachful of contemporary sand castles woven together by freeways and bumper-to-bumper traffic: a vast city not unlike other Southern California cities in its fragile and transitory nature. The project — which consists of both the tool itself and its imprint, which Cheng calls "Walk on LA" — has taken \$60,000 and almost five years of physical and administrative effort.

The Inaugural Roll-Out of the "Santa Monica Art Tool" is the perfect late '80s art event. Part media hype, part artistic tomfoolery, the project nonetheless has quite serious implications.

It is, above all, a spectacle: an event which, by virtue of its sheer size and audacity, cannot be ignored.

At a time when serious art critics have announced the Death of Painting, when live performance replaces sculpture in the art gallery and no artist is satisfied with less than total control of the exhibition environment, traditional paint canvas in a frame or bronze on a pedestal is becoming downright scarce.

The reasons for this are as various as the population of artists. Certainly, a renewed interest in spectacle enters into it: In a banal, image-saturated world new strategies are required to claim public attention.

There are those, too, for whom art is communication rather than commodity, or who see their efforts as productive of something more challenging than luxury playthings for people with large disposable incomes.

Museums and galleries have no choice but to reflect this shift. Their responses may be more or less enlightened, but if the artist isn't making objects, the dealer has nothing to sell.

I couldn't help but notice last week that the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston had not a single painting or sculpture on display. Most of the cavernous space was given over to a midcareer retrospective of

On Art

Charles Desmarais



the work of video artist Bill Viola; the rest went to photographer Sally Gall.

Fully two-thirds of L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art is, at this writing, devoted to works in media other than traditional painting and sculpture. In addition to the retrospective devoted to Frank Gehry's architecture — a spectacular show commanding half the museum — there are two major video installations, sketches for neon wall reliefs and site-specific sculptural environments, and photographs.

The one show that does consist largely of painting and sculpture is drawn from the permanent collection, held together only by a lame curatorial concept.

MOCA's approach to new forms of art is generally thoughtful and compelling; in fact the need for an exhibit space for such forms is one of the main reasons for the museum's existence. The current video shows, "Wilderness" by Mary Lucier and Bruce Nauman's hilarious and chilling "Clown Torture," each explore different subjects. Both, though, demonstrate a similar concern with presentation.

Lucier shows tapes of pristine landscapes and industrial scenes on a series of seven monitors; each monitor is mounted on a pedestal with a different connotation — a tree trunk, a classical column, etc. "Clown Torture" is a noisy, hyperactive chamber populated by screaming, hapless, clumsy and rude clowns projected on the walls or presented on a pile of monitors at the center of the room.

Even the more conservative Los Angeles County Museum of Art has had to succumb. In addition to the overwhelmingly successful David Hockney show, the main recent exhibitions concentrated on photography and costume. "Hollywood and History: Costume Design and Film" and "Masters of Starlight: Photographers and Hollywood" both closed earlier this month.

The Hockney exhibition is decidedly traditional painting, of course. Yet even this show, with the introductory wall text touting "one of the most celebrated artists of our

time," was heavily padded with the multiple photographs Hockney has been making for over 10 years.

LACMA's pandering movie star shows point to the special problems wrought by today's eclecticism. When painting and sculpture are no longer the sole bastions of High Art, anything goes, right?

So the museum sought out pictures of the most popular actors and actresses — promotional shots made, generally, under contract to the studios and agents and intended for the fanzines — and framed them up like real art. And they got the tackiest movie costumes, worn by some of the biggest stars, and presented them as if they were triumphs of our culture.

The problem with shows like these is not their contents; only a stone could fail to be charmed by such carefully manufactured beauty, such coercively illusionistic nostalgia. It is their context, or rather the lack of any context which would explain the original conditions under which the objects exhibited were made, that is disturbing.

It is the implication that in a museum devoted to high points of the human mind and spirit these commercial byproducts, chosen specifically as a result of their commercial effectiveness (it's the megafilms and megastars that are included), rank as true communication or art.

My recent trip to Houston gave me an opportunity to think about old-fashioned painting and "new forms" when I visited the Rothko Chapel. Painter Mark Rothko designed the chapel in 1964 with architect Philip Johnson.

The chapel is an example of installation art constructed at a time when installations were not common. An octagonal wall, furnished with only four plain wooden benches, is adorned with 14 canvasses painted by Rothko specifically for the building. The paintings are huge — perhaps 12 feet high and nearly as wide — covering most of the otherwise white walls.

They are entirely black: red-black; purple-black; funereally, extreme-unctionally black.

The mood in the Rothko Chapel (it was heavily visited on the day I was there) is extraordinarily somber, an attitude we rarely get to experience in today's slap-happy America.

It recalls such early installation works as cathedral stained-glass windows and tapestries. It explains and affirms the current artistic trend away from the isolated painting or sculpture.