ART REVIEW

Social issues leave imprint in 'Touched'

The Armory Center exhibition reveals wildly varied expressions in the works of 16 artists who have taught at the facility.

By HOLLY MYERS
Special to The Times

"Touched: Artists and Social Engagement" at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena is as earnest an exhibition as its rather clunky title implies, but — thanks to a thoughtful selection of artists and plenty of room for ambiguity — one that steers clear of the dogmatism and sentimentality that often plague discussions of art's social virtues.

Curated by Noel Korten, the show assembles 16 artists who've taught at the Armory at some time since it opened in 1989 and whose approaches, according to Korten's introduction, are characterized by a concern for "ideas or issues that are current in public discourse." The wording, one gathers, is purposely vague: The focus isn't so much on the issues themselves as on how these issues drive each artist and on the methods by which they're woven into the work.

The spectrum ranges from openly activist to downright oblique.

At the former end is Nancy Buchanan and Carolyn Potter's 2001 "Use Value," a garage-sale-themed installation incorporating visitors' donations of clothes, toiletries and nonperishable food items that will eventually be distributed to charity.

Bia Gayotto's photographs of students on an urban farm in El Monte and of Caltrans workers picking up trash on a Sun-
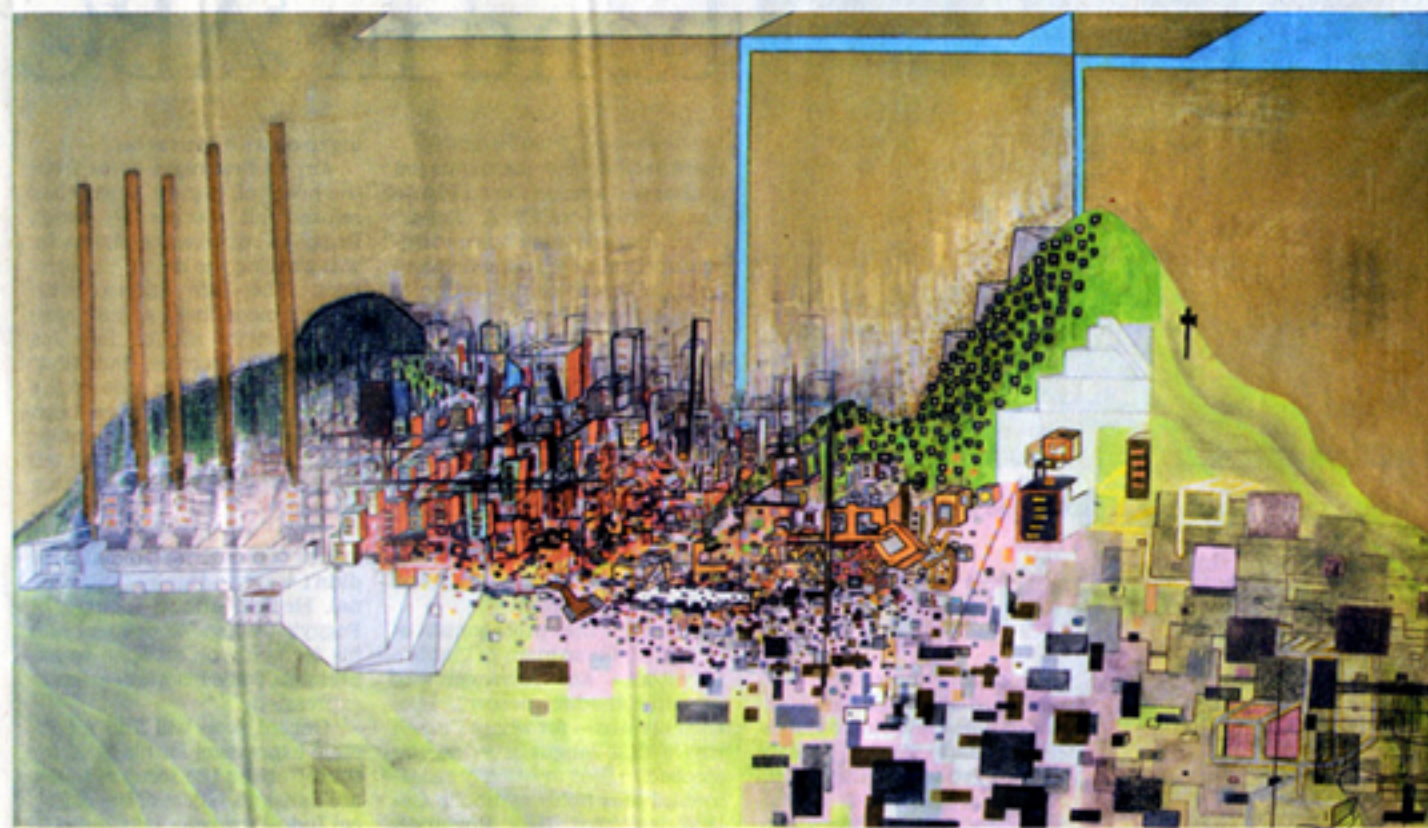
'CITY #9': *The 2006 work by Edward Coolidge uses colored pencil, graphite, chalk and gouache on paper.*

Armory Center

community involvement, although their aesthetic effect is rather flatter.

In other cases, artists employ allusions, unlikely juxtapositions or jokes to come at their subjects in new or unusual ways.

Lynn Berman makes large, colorful, seemingly spontaneous line drawings based on maps of war routes throughout Eastern Europe. Catherine Ng, a book artist, crafts accordion-shaped "books" — emblazoned with Chinese and American symbols — out of Legos.

Watts," another accordion-shaped book, mimics Ed Ruscha's "Every Building on the Sunset Strip," casting a new perspective on that seminal 1966 work by suggesting the race and class dynamics underpinning our concept of the city's geography.

Several of the artists, meanwhile, speak to social issues through the use of materials.

Photographers Joel Glassman and the husband-and-wife team Davis & Davis enlarge small common objects (dis-

dolls, respectively) to huge proportions, calling attention to the things one overlooks in daily life and subtly tweaking their significance.

Kim Abeles' "Thunder of Waves" is a wall of hand-drawn, waterfall-themed wallpaper embedded with tiny video monitors featuring footage of Niagara Falls. Liz Young's sculptures are mannequin-like figures made from skin-colored fabric stuffed with rice.

The late Mark Niblock-Smith employed earthy, archetypal ma-

mysterious, totemic air: a log pierced with thick metal nails; a small steel cage filled with a ball of rabbit fur; a pair of wall-mounted deer antlers strung with long plastic beads.

Shirley Tse, by contrast, works with entirely synthetic materials. Her 2003 sculpture "Brazil," which involves several pale yellow polystyrene kick boards wound with seaweed-like coils of nylon tubing, is one of the most beautiful in the show.

The spare and erratic nature of the wall texts can be frustrat-

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cus, many of these works could use a little more context. (A DVD that accompanies the show, produced in lieu of a catalog and including interviews with every artist except Niblock-Smith, is a valuable supplement.)

It's telling, however, that the most enigmatic pieces, such as "Brazil" — the ones that seem to resist explanation or context — are also the most resonant.

Olga Koumoundouros' enchanting "Penny Is Blue" consists of a small, copper-coated, animal-like figure lying on a sheet of cardboard on the floor. Edward Coolidge's elegant "Air Carrier Inspection" is a long coil of white PVC piping that snakes around a narrow room just off the main gallery and is nearly indistinguishable from the building's own pipes. A video camera moving inside the tube feeds images that are projected onto one of the room's walls.

The most poignant work in the show is almost laughably simple: an untitled wall piece by Rodney McMillian (he refers to it, in his interview, as a "paint-

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Images from Armory Center

'EARTHWORKS URBAN FARM': *Community involvement is a loosely applied theme by Bia Gayotto on her 2007 print.*

'Touched' reveals imprint of social issues on artists

ing") consisting of a navy blue blanket cut in half and pinned to the wall with thumbtacks. At a glance, it looks like a bad joke — a "Saturday Night Live" caricature of contemporary art — but there's something weirdly touching, even beautiful about its shape and particularly about the way it parts in the middle, like a curtain on a stage. Given the shabbiness of the blanket, the gesture of theatricality evokes a bittersweet grandeur.

In this single, virtually unaltered object, McMillian manages to encapsulate (or reveal) entire volumes of human experience: poverty, fear, need, comfort, hope, optimism, even joy. It gets to the heart of the show's thesis, that art is a nexus of near-infinite connections — between artist and society, artist and object, object and viewer, viewer and artist, viewer and curator, and on and on.

The traditional "white box" model of exhibition, to which this exhibition adheres, tends to ob-

'RAIN GIRL': *A 2006 digital print by the husband and wife team of Davis & Davis.*

scure those connections, pulling the art object out of its real-world context to be suspended in the social vacuum of the gallery. It's always exciting to see work with the sensitivity, intelligence or poetic resonance to cut through that, as much of this work does.