

← Back to Original Article

ART

Turning Over a Brighter Leaf

'Four Seasons' sculptor Jennifer Pastor has found freedom in L.A. life.

November 24, 1996 | Hunter Drohojowska Philp | Hunter Drohojowska Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

It is three weeks before Thanksgiving and Los Angeles is wilting under record-high temperatures. The sky is ribboned with a special effects concoction of pink and aqua, the hyper-real enhancements that represent seasonal change in Southern California. It is a perfect day to be visiting Jennifer Pastor, because the absence of conventional seasons here is the inspiration for her recent suite of sculptures "The Four Seasons," which forms the centerpiece of a show of her work opening today at the Museum of Contemporary Art downtown.

An East Coast transplant, Pastor is attempting to come to terms with the strange experience of the holidays in L.A., she says. "I was thinking of the novelty of these prefabricated seasons, like pumpkin lots with hay bushels and Christmas tree lots. They become L.A.'s only real seasons. In between holidays, they change back to vacant lots. Everything seemed so faux. I was losing track of my calendar, which I found very liberating."

Pastor's "Winter" consists of artificial pine trees on snowbanks that extend from a white gallery wall. "Summer" is a cluster of giant fiberglass conch shells filled with artificial water. "Fall" consists of 10-foot copper stalks bearing enlarged ears of corn, and "Spring" will be a big moth perched on a wall.

Also on view at MOCA is "Untitled (The Christmas Flood)," a baroque cascade of plastic water washing away ornamented Christmas trees. This pivotal work was a breakthrough for the artist's reputation; it elicited a flood of critical praise when shown at L.A.'s Richard Telles Gallery in 1994. In a review in last September's Artforum, David A. Greene wrote: "Pastor sidesteps the institutionalized strangeness of art for the strange institution of artifice: Her work takes as its subject the realm of the reverently unreal, where nature's serendipity is frozen and a novelty is achieved that is fundamentally different from the usual art-world kind."

In fact, "The Christmas Flood," which Pastor refers to as "natural disaster hits artificial nature on seasonal holiday," has generated a tsunami of interest in the artist. Last year, she was awarded the prestigious Louis Comfort Tiffany grant of \$25,000. The piece also prompted this show, which originated, in a smaller form, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, where it was organized by curator Amada Cruz. It also prompted computer-mogul-turned-collector Peter Norton to underwrite the production costs of her then-unfinished "The Four Seasons," in exchange for a first option when completed. As it turned out, he bought the works for his prestigious collection of up-and-coming artists.

Unassuming and earnest, Pastor says she can't help but be distressed by so much attention. "I'm a little nervous about it to tell you the truth," she says modestly. Looking even younger than her 30 years, with her hair pulled back in a ponytail and wearing lavender wire-rimmed glasses, she talks at an

impatient, breathless pace, her sentences tumbling forth before her ideas are completely resolved.

For several months, she has been working 18-hour days, she says, frantically finishing the last sculpture for this show, a replica of a large brown moth with its wings spread wide. "This started as the least important of 'The Four Seasons,' a sort of abstract punctuation," she explains. "But then it became the most important part of the project."

Pastor's concerns are amplified by the fact that she was unable to complete "Spring" in time for the Chicago opening of her show last summer. "I came down with a virus right before that show and it affected my eyesight," she says. She hired an assistant to help her complete the moth, but after several months, she was unhappy with the work and had to start again from scratch. As a result, only one of the seasons, "Fall," was presented in Chicago, since it is the only one that stands on its own as a piece.

Seated at a table in her El Segundo studio, Pastor is surrounded by the detritus of her endeavors. Her wall is plastered with photographs of moths. What look like moth wings, airbrush-painted onto nickel silver, lie all over the place, along with little moth bodies, hand-carved and cast in plastic, and tiny photo-etched brass antennae. These are the rejects. Pastor is still building a better moth.

"It is both sexes, since it has the enlarged abdomen of the female and the enlarged feelers of the male. And it tends to be hairier than an actual moth," she says. The artist's assistant, Joady Willis, is in the process of applying at least a dozen clumps of hair in various shades of dusty brown, strand by strand, to the wings and bodies.

Of the correspondence between "Spring" and the kind of insects that leave holes in sweaters, Pastor explains, "the adult stage of a moth is actually spring. It de-cocoons as an adult and lives maybe 48 hours to reproduce. It doesn't do anything else like eat or sleep, it just reproduces and dies."

Pastor opted for the more mundane moth over the butterfly, she says, because "I didn't want a pop symbol. I really tried to pick the most archetypal moth characteristics so it leaves the realm of symbol and becomes alive."

For all their cheerful insouciance, Pastor's sculptures are based upon conceptual systems. "It goes from idealized [winter] to cartoon [shells] to hyper-real [corn] to alive [moth]," she says. The suite began in Dijon, France, as an installation in the exhibition "Surface de Reparation" at FRAC Bourgogne, a government-sponsored art space, and was guided by the impulse to create four seasons in four corners of the exhibition space in four weeks. She lost interest in the more abstract notion when she returned to the West Coast.

A Connecticut native who grew up in Wallingford, outside New Haven, Pastor knew she was an artist from childhood. Two years ago, in an article about her work, the art magazine *Blocnotes* reproduced a drawing made when she was 12, a complicated composition of lusty men and women dipping and dancing in a disco. "My libido was pumping," she quips in reference to the work.

Pastor and her sister were adopted by a father who worked in management at a telephone company and a mother who is a nurse. In 1988, she earned a bachelor's degree from New York's School for the Visual Arts, and though she draws and paints with confidence, she majored in sculpture.

"Even when I was little I liked building things. I feel so challenged by sculpture, I've never felt the need to be an installation artist," she says. "My whole pursuit is about building something in real space. The test is whether it works on its own. At Chicago, they had didactic wall labels [for Pastor's show], and I was

almost in tears. I said, 'You're giving people the map to enter it when I want so much for there to be multiple entries and perceptions.'

Instead of going directly to graduate school, Pastor got a job building animal habitats at the Bronx Zoo. "I sought out this job and got it by lying compulsively about my experience. I wanted to learn about every way a thing could be made. It was all about working with exotic materials and trying to solve problems. We made vines, nests, roots, mud banks and trees and most of them had to work architectonically, to open and close, be hinged, be lit and be insulated."

Living and working in the Bronx was an experience unlike her suburban upbringing, and when she did decide to go to graduate school, she made an equally large leap. "I picked UCLA because I liked the idea of going to the other side of the continent," she says. "This whole thing of defining what the opposite is and going there as a way to start over and get out of a rut appeals to me."

Southern California has changed her art dramatically. "It was the absence of things and the low bright culture that influenced my work," she says. "Plus the new color. The last 50 years of color is different from the East Coast, which is more of a sad, oppressive 200 years of color."

"All of my materials changed when I moved here. The first sculpture I made looked so rusty and old. I saw it in the sunshine at UCLA and thought 'Oh, God!' It had a seriousness to it that looked glaring."

At UCLA, where she earned her master of fine art degree in 1992, she also met her companion of the last six years, sculptor Charles Ray, who is a professor in the art department.

Although concerned with surface decoration, structural integrity is the principal aim of her sculpture. She does obsessive research by reading mail-order catalogs and attending conventions and trade shows before beginning a sculpture, and her works incorporate elements of kitsch pop culture, reconfigured for her needs.

For "The Christmas Flood," for example, she went to the L.A. Mart several times a week. "I own enough Christmas ornaments to open my own store," she says. But when it came to decorating the trees, she made each ornament larger than life. Her artificial trees were built according to her specifications in a smaller than life-sized scale, and she molded the clear plastic waves of water by hand with a heat gun.

When it is time to leave her studio, the Chevron refinery smokestacks across the street are shadowy cutouts against a Day-Glo sunset. Pastor leans for a moment against her light blue pickup and marvels at her good fortune in getting shown at two such prestigious museums at this point in her career. But she admits to the dangers of having such a high-profile museum debut. Not even she has seen all of "The Four Seasons" installed together.

"Right now I feel really queasy about it because I feel like it's just so public," she says. "But I really appreciate the support."

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JENNIFER PASTOR, Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave. Dates: Tuesdays to Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Through Feb. 2. Phone: (213) 626-6222.