

Joy Silverman, director of the LACE gallery downtown, organized the art exhibition opening today at the Cotton Exchange Building.

Artists take over Cotton Exchange for major show

By Hunter Drohojowska

This weekend, the hippest place for art-watching is not the chic, white-walled galleries of West Hollywood but a scruffy old structure called the Cotton Exchange Building on the corner of Third and Main streets in downtown Los Angeles. More than 225 artists have taken over three floors of the building, including the storefronts, to cover every nook and cranny, closet, elevator, bathroom and window with their art. The atmosphere has produced murals, installations, sculptures, performances and video. The building is open to any artist who staked out his space two weeks ago, and after May 11 even more space may become available for late arrivals.

Sponsored by L.A. Contemporary Exhibitions, an artist-run space, the Cotton Exchange Show is modeled after similar efforts such as the 1980 Times Square Show in New York and the 1983 Ritz Show in Washington, D.C. (Joy Silverman, director of LACE, organized the Ritz Show while assistant director of Washington Project for the Arts, also a non-profit space.) The Times Square Show attracted tremendous critical attention for challenging the hegemony of taste controlled by commercial galleries and for catalyzing an interest in graffiti art and other urban-inspired imagery. Silverman hopes for equally stimulating results here.

"I've never heard of most of the names in this show," Silverman admits readily. "We really tried to reach out to other communities to get artists, contacting Hispanic groups and organizations in Watts. A show like this really brings people together who might not know each other. They start working together installing work, sitting in the space, whatever, and a dialogue develops. You gain a sense of power developing something like this, realize you can develop your own gallery if you want. You don't have to go into the system."

As she escorted a visitor through the building at the beginning of the week, much was incomplete, but a feeling of urban and Hispanic influence prevailed. Seth Seiderman stood on a ladder, painting the wall of one room with a mural about voter registration and what he called the



Chris Galkner/Herald photo/epstein

"Caldo Largo." The artist explained, "'Caldo Largo' is a Spanish colloquialism for the 'Soup of Life.' It means a soup of survival, you add to it every day. I'll have a pot of soup here, but it's not exactly a soup kitchen. It symbolizes the political process and establishing a continuum, specifically in the current political climate when the idea of hunger and survival is acute." Seiderman's words ring particularly true when spoken in the confines of the Cotton Exchange: One block away are the missions which serve actual soup to the impoverished bums in the area.

Silverman leads the visitor through corridors and rooms marked with numbers, each corresponding to an artist, so work can be located by a blueprint-style map of the building. There are mostly murals — of hollow-eyed, gaunt black figures; of screaming, cartoonish figures dodging space ships in the sky; of "La Madre de la Calle Main," a madonna giving birth to death; of a giant green man and headless yellow woman on either side of the printed query "Who is more powerful, E.T., Christ, or Santa Claus?"

Other artists have built installations — a bathroom is papered with black-and-white pornographic photographs; a room is filled with trashed TV sets; an elevator interior is painted magenta, with flashing lights. One artist, Marc Pally, has presented a path of pennies running up the stairs and along the corridors of the expansive building. The corner shop in the building is reserved for a monthlong schedule of performances, and another store at the building's entrance will sell posters, T-shirts or anything else artists offer for less than \$20. Visitors will also be able to rent Walkman-type audio tours recorded by artist Dan Chapman.

At the Mexican fish restaurant across the street, Silverman sank into a booth, exhausted.

The unusually freewheeling nature of the show, she said, taking a sip of her strawberry caramba, "gets artists out of the mind set of only making work for a gallery, work to sell. When artists started to come here, they were looking for more traditional spaces, with white walls. They asked if the floors would be mopped, things like that. Then they started to see spaces everywhere. They realized the temporariness of it all. An artist risks a lot more in that situation. There's a good chance that certain artists will go in a new direction as a result of this experience."

What's more, contends Silverman, the artists at the Cotton Exchange have actually been influenced by the space itself, to make art that fits uniquely into this show.

"One artist wanted to use a prime installation space to hang her paintings, and we basically said it should be used for an installation, which she ended up doing."

The open show came about through the auspices of the Community Redevelopment Agency, which purchased the deteriorating Cotton Exchange Building to demolish, and there are plans to construct a new building for state office workers on the site. Yet in the building's final days, CRA administrator Ed Helfeld not only agreed to let LACE use it for the show, he assigned a construction crew and architects to put up drywall and create fire exits. The CRA even paid for the security officer guarding the building's entrance.

Said Silverman, "It really had a lot to do with Helfeld being into the art scene downtown. Basically, CRA wants

Where	The Cotton Exchange Show Third and Main streets, downtown
When	Today through June 2 Thu-Sat, noon-5 p.m. Opening reception today, 8 p.m.-midnight
How much	Free
Info	620-0104

Where	Downtown Artists' Show LACE, 240 S. Broadway, third floor
When	Today through June 2 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wed-Sat Opening reception today, 6 to 8 p.m.
How much	Free
Info	620-0104

to make the area viable again."

The Cotton Exchange Show is just one reason to venture downtown this weekend. LACE, located on the third floor at 240 S. Broadway, features their Seventh Annual Downtown Artists' Show. Howard Fox, associate curator of painting and sculpture at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., selected the work of 10 artists who live "between the freeways" in the downtown areas: Cliff Benjamin, Kathryn Brehm, Dan Chapman, Lois Colette, Charley Crist, Stephen T. Danko, Joyce Kohl, Christopher Michael, Katsuhia Sakai and Seth Seiderman. Both exhibitions will continue through June 2.

This is also the weekend of the LACE-sponsored tours of artists' studios in the downtown area. This year over 130 artists have signed up, about double the number in previous years. The tours are from noon to 5 p.m., Saturday and Sunday. Maps from LACE cost \$5, or \$3 to LACE members, and visitors walk from studio to studio to see work and talk with the artists.