

# Margo Leavin's 'mini-MoCA'

*Her new sculpture gallery is a gamble that's paying off*

By Hunter Drohojowska

"This looks more like a museum than a gallery," said a friend. "Are they selling these things?"

Indeed, the art community has nicknamed Margo Leavin's new gallery "mini-MoCA" in praise of the arched redwood ceilings and cavernous white-walled space. The debut show, "American Sculpture" — which continues through Sept. 15 — is the talk of the town, considered by critics to be chock-full of museum-quality work by artists ranging from the superstars to the ingenues. A visitor is greeted by George Segal's plaster nude wall relief with a turquoise towel draped over her lap. The eye picks up the blue color repeated on the underside of a gold "airship" by Brian Hunt mounted higher on the wall. To the side are threads of pink and blue neon by Keith Sonnier. Immediately, one realizes that this show negates Ad Reinhardt's quip about sculpture being something you back into while trying to look at a painting.

"For seven years," said Leavin, "I've been toying with the idea of additional space because I'm so involved with sculpture." Leavin appears as carefully designed as the surrounding objects, dressed in her architectural black tent dress, with a chunky silver chain around her neck, lips and nails lacquered scarlet. She rattled off a list of the buildings she'd considered in West Hollywood before she found that her own landlord, Tony Duquette, was willing to rent his theater. (It was formerly a post office and still sports a carved eagle and flagpole.) "It took me three very stressful months of thinking should I or shouldn't I," she said.

The 5,500-square-foot space, at 817 N. Hilldale, is conveniently beside her first gallery on Robertson north of Santa Monica Blvd., but the financial commitment was considerable, more than \$5,000

Leavin/C-6, Col. 1



Margo Leavin and the "Chattering Men" by Jonathan Borofsky: Leavin deliberated for seven years before opening a sculpture gallery adjacent to her original gallery in West Hollywood, but the new space's first exhibit is drawing 150 visitors a day.

Javier Mendoza/Herald photographer

# Margo Leavin turns a theater into a gallery

Leavin / Continued from C-1

per month. She talked to her lawyer, her accountant, her friends. But in the end, "I went into the theater's attic, which was closed off, and saw that ceiling! I thought, 'This is the most gorgeous thing. I have to have it.'"

After negotiating 10-year leases on both of her gallery spaces, Leavin hired architect David Seurrier for the renovation and spent \$10,000 on shipping pieces out from the East Coast. "It was a gamble," she admits. "I knew that if things didn't go well after a year, I'd have to sublet." But more than 1,000 enthusiasts came to the opening, attendance rose to an astonishing 150 people a day, and most importantly, the art has sold, "way beyond our expectations."

Few dealers concentrate on sculpture because it is difficult to exhibit and even harder to sell. Every piece in Leavin's show, however, looks comfortable and appealing, as though designed specifically for the space. "Every time I do one of these group shows I think never again, but this was the most difficult. It was months of being on the phone and going back east to choose work." She describes select-



Margo Leavin says the sculpture in her new gallery has been selling "way beyond our expectations."

ing works the way an artist might talk about choosing the right color or gesture. "I went to one gallery three times before I found the de Kooning I wanted in a storage closet. I had been looking at works by (George) Segal and (Carl) Andre and (Sol) Lewitt, but I couldn't find pieces that were quite right. The last trip I took to New York, there was one afternoon I could relax but my conscience made me go to the Hirsch and Adler galleries, and there were the pieces I needed. I've seen every piece Segal has done but this one was sheer poetry. Beautiful scale. The Andre is exceptional."

She gestures toward a double row of silvery lead blocks on the floor in the center of the gallery, visually linking a huge gray felt hanging by Robert Morris and gray chattering mechanical men by Jonathan Borofsky. One sees them refracted through a column of clear acrylic resin by Robert Irwin, a sculpture with a story of its own. "Bob had first said he'd be in the show after he saw the space but then said no. It boiled down to the fact that only a 9-foot column was for sale but he really wanted to show a 12-foot column. I said, 'So? If somebody is interested we'll show them the 9-foot column in storage and have the taller one in the show.' And it's pivotal, really important. It's that sort of pushing, and pushing and pushing and fighting to get the right pieces that makes the show. A good piece is enough of an inspiration to make an entire show."

Leavin's interest in art dates from her childhood, which she spent in New York City, going to museums and galleries with relatives. Her parents were not wealthy but fund raising for liberal causes brought them into contact with the politically aware artists of the day. Her family moved to California, and she went to Berkeley to study psychology and art history, then

worked in social welfare. "At first I couldn't put together the idea of art and business as a way to make a living," she said. Leavin began selling contemporary prints privately from her home, but a neighbor complained and she was forced to continue her business in a gallery in 1970. In ways, she still considers her business a form of social welfare. "It's wonderful to know that there is feedback in what you're doing, that you can educate many more people and they in turn will be supportive of more museums and galleries, and that maybe the system will start to work in this town."

Leavin has never married and demurs at telling her age. "In this town?" she laughs. Leavin confesses to the common dilemma of the single career woman. "This job is so all-engrossing, it's not 9 to 5. Everyone I know who is single or uninvolved is in the same position. Because you're carrying a lot of responsibility, you're used to making quick decisions and you don't have the patience for things you had when you were younger. It's past the point of dating. You want to deal with relationships but it takes a lot of energy, and in truth there just isn't that much available all the way around."

Leavin's love is her work, and what makes the current show particularly invigorating is the idiosyncratic mixture of younger, relatively unknown artists with modern masters — for instance, Jill Giegerich's neo-cubism next to Claes Oldenburg's bronze cigarette butt. "It's so much extra work on the one hand, but on the other, it's so exciting. There are many people who won't come to see the show if they don't know an artist's name. My putting the established with the less established gives them confidence in the younger artists. It exposes the work to people who have not seen it before and somehow that has to come back to me. In my self-respect, if nothing else."

She cites the example of an immense black boxy work by Robert Grosvenor. "I knew no one out here knew Grosvenor's name, but that piece was so incredible I went to great expense to bring it out from his studio on Patchogue, Long Island. That piece was so beautiful, so mystical, I just wanted it no matter what. I ended up selling the piece and it's going back to New York, to Ed Broida's museum. It's one of the favorite pieces he bought out of the show. That gives me confidence and security that I made the right decision. That's one of the most gratifying experiences."