

It's the Water

Liquid Art

Look at a map of the country and try to decide where to build a city the size of San Diego," says Robert Miller. "One of the last places you'd consider would be Southern California, because of its lack of a good water source."

Miller is an artist who has created several public artworks with water themes. The San Diego Water Authority chose him to create something for the lobby of its new offices in Kearny Mesa. Now the piece has been given an award by the Metropolitan Water District of

Southern California.

LOCAL EVENTS

"Liquid Art," a photo exhibition of all 20 award-

winners from five counties is on view in San Diego. Several, like Miller's, are fountains. One is an aquarium. Another is a 13-acre emergency-storage pond adjacent to Lake Hodges. In all, four award-winning pieces are in San Diego County.

Miller's isn't typical public-fountain fare. Called "Water Drip Fountain" when it was a work-in-progress, it's called "untitled (an homage)" by the artist today. (The

homage is to performance artist Chris Burden, Miller says.)

Initially Miller proposed pieces to the San Diego Water Authority that weren't fountains and didn't use water. But they declined them. The finished piece is a small pool that's shaped like a map of San Diego County. From a pipe 17 feet above the pool a single drop falls — every 20 seconds.

To a reporter's suggestion that Miller said to the Authority with this piece, "Well, here's your water, but not much," he agrees. "Yeah, it could be interpreted that way, and it was by them."

It took months for Miller to figure out how to make that water drip correctly. Is it fair to say that he needed to create a dripping faucet? That nobody else wants one, but he did? "Yes, although if your faucet drips, try observing it over two months," Miller says. "It'll drip more at times and less at other times. How do you control it? I talked to everyone from water engineers to physicists and finally solved the problem."

What does the drip sound like? The hidden mechanism that controls the drip is much louder than the drip itself, says Miller. "It's the click of a solenoid."

Public fountains are notoriously high-maintenance — or else they become planters after a few years.

Hoping to spare his piece this fate, Miller has presented the Authority with a maintenance manual.

"Conceptually, I like the relationship between maintaining a fountain and maintaining a water system for the county," says Miller,



Robert Miller, untitled (an homage), San Diego Water Authority



Paul Hobson, Viewage, 18700 West Bernardo Drive



Lynn Susholtz and Aida Mancillas, Water Marks, Mission Trails Regional Park

"and having to find the money for both."

The Water Conservation Garden by Jeri Deneen and Jon Powell in El Cajon is another of the local award-winners. Completed in 1999, it features over 600 plant species as well as sculpture along its winding paths.

Lynn Susholtz and Aida Mancillas received an award for "Water Marks" in Mission Trails Regional Park. A 200-foot mosaic map of the San Diego River, it's made of all natural materials, including ceramic tiles in many shades of blue. Bronze information plaques tell the history of the people, plants, and animals who have lived along the river. The texts are in English, Spanish, Braille, and the language of the Kumeyaay.

Water is absent from this one. But, says Susholtz, "referring to the history refers to the water." That "continuing element" has made it possible for all of us to live here.

"Viewage" (rhymes with "sewage") is the name of Paul Hobson's piece — the emergency holding pond below a ridge of homes overlooking Lake Hodges. A project of the San Diego Water Utilities Department, it was completed in 1997. "Nearby homeowners were worried that it would be unsightly," says Hobson, who was given the task of designing something that would blend with the surrounding landscape.

Nearly the size of two Target stores, it's 210,000 square feet. Made of 550 concrete slabs, it was poured in checkerboard style. Each square, while still wet, was sprinkled with color "hardeners" that Hobson says he used

like pixels.

"We chose green, brown, and purple, because they match the natural colors in the area. If you look, you'll see that Southern California scrub has a real purple tinge to it. It's kind of a surprise to me. But it was definitely one of the colors to use."

Hobson believes his design is best appreciated from the air. He has seen it more than once from a small plane and photographed it as he hung out of its open window. "From the air you see nature, a pixelated view of nature, then nature again."

A giant pump on a boom was used to pour the concrete, but the color hardeners were applied by hand — sown like seeds from bags by "dozens of guys walking along in rubber boots." Can people walk around in the empty pond today? "They're not supposed to, but skateboarders use it," says Hobson. "They like it because there's no joint where the sloped sides meet the floor. It was a great engineering feat by the city engineers."

— Jeanne Schinto

"Liquid Art"
Comerica Bank Gallery
600 B Street, weekdays,
7:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m.
through Friday, February 15,
Center For the Moving Arts
3255 Fifth Avenue, weekdays,
10:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m.
Tuesday, February 19,
through Friday, March 22
Free
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