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Why Mel Chin is giving away the land art design of his subversively charming Current: LA native garden



A view of Mel Chin's installation garden, "The TIE that BINDS," at the Bowtie Parcel on the L.A. River. (Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)



By **Carolina A. Miranda** · Contact Reporter

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The city of Los Angeles' first public art biennial [Current: LA Water](#), organized by the Department of Cultural Affairs, kicked off this past weekend with the unveiling of sculptures, art talks, DJ sets and a [tea ceremony](#) that used water from the L.A. River. (Hope no one drank it because, um, [that broken sewage pipe](#).)

Art installation sites are scattered all over the city, from San Pedro to downtown to Canoga Park, so it's impossible to visit the sites in a day or even a week. So I started with one: [Mel Chin's "The TIE that BINDS: the MIRROR of the FUTURE"](#) at the Bowtie Parcel, a spit of land along the L.A. River in Glassell Park.

Here, Chin has planted a native plants garden, whose [design he has made public](#), to encourage others around L.A. to plant this work of land art on their properties, too.

At the Bowtie Parcel, which is overgrown with weeds as well as invasive species, Chin's garden blends right into the landscape. In fact, you'll have to keep your eyes carefully peeled to find it, since it's still in its infancy and obscured by other scrub. (I was aided by my trusty research assistant, Bonnie the American Staffordshire Terrier.)

This means that the garden is no breathtaking work of land art. (More visually compelling is Michael Parker's 2014 obelisk carving nearby, ["The Unfinished."](#)) But as a work of wry activism, it is quite charming — even subversive.

Chin has explored the idea of the garden as art before. In the 1990s, as part of a residency at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, he conceived of a [garden that could leech lead contaminants out of the soil](#). (He has long been active on [the issue of lead contamination](#).)

The more intriguing aspect of Chin's piece at the Bowtie Parcel is that he is encouraging others to plant the same garden, in the same configuration, in their own backyard spaces (so-called mirror sites). Already, a number of area homeowners have done so — and the L.A. County Museum of Art will install a mirror site on its grounds this week.

The biennial has as its theme the question of water. And Chin's gesture nods to [the ongoing drought](#) and the drier landscapes all Angelenos will probably eventually be forced to embrace out of necessity (hence the word "future" in the title of the piece).

As far as art goes, Chin's individual garden may seem small, even inconsequential. But if he manages to persuade a bunch of grass-addicted Angelenos to rip out their lawns in a collective gesture of high art, then

its effect will be multiplied. It may also be long-lasting — more so, perhaps, than anything he could have carved in the cement.

“Current: LA Water”

When: Through Aug. 14

Where: Sites around Los Angeles; Mel Chin’s “The TIE that BINDS: the Mirror of the Future” is on view at the Bowtie Parcel, 2780 W. Casitas Ave., Glassell Park, Los Angeles

Info: currentla.org and the-tie-that-binds.org.

Stay tuned for my visits to other “Current: LA Water” sites in the coming days.

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