Refik Anadol and and Peggy Weil's *Under LA:* Making the Invisible Visible

By Karen Moss

> Art does not reflect the visible; it makes visible.
> —Paul Klee, 1920[1]

The quote above, from the first section of *Creative Credo* (1920) artist Paul Klee commented on how the function of art is not merely to reproduce what is *seen,* but more importantly, to reveal what is *unseen*. Whether painting representational landscapes or geometric abstractions, Klee remained inspired by his primary motivation to make the hidden forces of nature visible. Refik Anadol, a media artist who works in site-specific public art and Peggy Weil, a multidisciplinary artist who explores our changing physical, digital and sociopolitical landscapes, follows in Klee's footsteps to make the unseen visible, using 21st century research and technology in their collaborative project, *UnderLA*. For this project, Anadol and Weil made five video sequences of the soil and sediment that lies deep underneath Los Angeles by collaborating with geologists and using state-of-the-art technologies. The final result—a monumental scale video projection of scrolling images going down 1400 below the earth's surface—was installed in two locations along the LA River: at the origin of the river at the convergence of Bell Creek and Arroyo Calabasas in Canoga Park and at the historical First Street Bridge in downtown LA, built in 1929.

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[1] Paul Klee, *Creative Creedo,* [*Schöpferische Konfession*] (1920), Section I, translated in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, edited by Herschel Chipp with contributions by Peter Selz and Joshua C. Taylor. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 182-186.

Imagine descending deep below the surface of Los Angeles and seeing the city's complex aquifers –alternating layers of permeable soil, and porous rock fractures that are capable of holding and transmitting water. Imagine further that in viewing these layers from which our groundwater is extracted, that you would be going back in both time and into space to see the geologic history and formation of the Los Angeles Basin.

To create this deep descent below the surface, Anadol and Weil worked with USGS Geologists to obtain data and photograph soil samples from two Los Angeles well sites. Taking samples at 10-foot intervals, the geologists drilled down 1400 feet below the surface which is roughly equivalent to traveling back in time 2.5 million years into the Pliocene era. Anadol and Weil digitally processed scrolling images of soil samples taken by geologists ranging from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic: transitioning from earth-toned swaths of sand and sedimented rock to tiny colorful pebbles and crystals. The 27-minute videos are also interspersed with data visualization sequences created from 3D lithographic models and hydrographic well data showing fluctuating water levels from these same wells – a reminder that LA's aquifers are stressed by the continuing drought.

While the actual footage of the videos is the same in each location, the projections along the river each appear different because of the distinct features of the built environment and disparate viewing conditions. While one viewed both projections from

a bridge, the scale and distance varied considerably. At the origin of the river, one could stand on the bridge facing the exact convergence of the two water sources (the Bell Creek and the Calabasas Arroyo) that formed a concrete triangle at the confluence of the LA River. With a vantage point relatively low to the ground, the shallow riverbed was framed by vertical, upright walls with relatively few distractions around the video projections. Conversely, the historic First Street bridge had a much higher and wider viewing area, with the concrete banks sloping into the channel at about a 45-degree angle. All the architecture and infrastructure visible from the bridge became part of an overarching panorama of the work including the illuminated buildings of the downtown skyline, high voltage power lines and railroad tracks.

What is interesting about *UnderLA* is the tension between the didactic and the poetic aspects of the project. For instance, the titles the video sequence read like technical scientific notations: Lithologic Model of the Los Angeles Basin within Los Angeles County; LOS2 • Descent from -10' to -1400'; Water Levels • Monitoring Wells 2778/LOS2 1936-2016; TORR2 • Descent from -10' to -1280' and Water Levels • Monitoring Well 906D 1934-2016). In contrast to this, the images of the soil samples are highly aesthetic, especially when projected in the night sky onto the *tabula rasa* of the concrete riverbanks.

In both installations, what would be rather dry, quantitative scientific information is translated in sweeping, stunning data visualization. The imagery represents a landscape portrait for our arid times, a creation story of the unseen beauty and vulnerability of the

underground aquifer system made visible above ground in the built environment, ultimately to remind the spectator of the importance of water conservation.

MEL CHIN'S *TIE that BINDS: The MIRROR of the FUTURE—*
A California Native Garden Project that Keeps Growing
By Karen Moss

When a devasting flood occurred in Los Angeles in 1938, Frank L. Shaw, then-mayor of the city, was recalled for his negligence. Subsequently, the Army Corps of Engineer started its huge project to encase most of the LA River in concrete to promote better flood control and alleviate these disasters. Unfortunately, this reduced the water levels substantially in the massive concrete channel with sometimes only a trickle of water flowing through—since the 1930s only a few precious areas of naturally flowing river remained. These areas include the primary flood control structure, the Sepulveda Dam Basin, a final few miles of the LA River in Long Beach and most prominently, and 11 miles stretch of the river known as the Glendale Narrows in a neighborhood called Atwater Village.

At this location is a parcel of land known as the Bowtie Parcel—approximately 18 acres land that includes the former Taylor Yard, a Southern Pacific Railroad service facility. Simultaneously, this site has remnants of the railroad in its mostly post-industrial landscape, but it also includes the natural beauty of the river, flora and fauna of the riparian environment that has gradually become filled with non-native, water-depleting invasive plant species.

Mel Chin's public art project, *The TIE that BINDS, 2016* imagined how the Bowtie Parcel would look planted when with water-saving California native plants when it becomes a State Park in the future. Working in collaboration with Los Angeles landscape architects Calvin Abe and Glen Dake, for *CURRENT/LA* Chin designed eight garden plots of California native plants to envision a "mirror of the future landscape." Ultimately, their grand vision was only to plant gardens at the Bowtie, but in hundreds of locations in the greater Los Angeles area.

To accomplish this ambitious plan, Chin's first organized eights site for what he called "mirror gardens,"—plots identical to those at the Bowtie planted in the yards of homeowners and institutions in diverse locations in LA for people to see drought-friendly native plantings in their own neighborhood. Additionally, during the entire run of the biennial Chin and his collaborators set-up a *TIE that BINDS* Field Office at the Bowtie—a white pop-tent operated by "Mirror Makers" (students volunteers from the Cal Poly Pomona Landscape Architecture Program, Otis College of Art and Design, and USC Roski School of Art and Design). The "Mirror Makers" conducted tours of the eight model gardens at the Bowtie and provided information to educate the public about how with the ultimate goal of urging them to plant a "mirror garden" at their own home. Each property owner could receive one of 512 unique, artist-designed blueprints, a list of native plant species and instructions on how to grow a garden that requires little or no watering. Chin promoted his concept as an opportunity for everyone to have a "work of Land Art in their own yard." The Field Office also served as space to document the new mirror gardens growing in yards of homeowners and institutions in LA and as a site for a series of public programs.

During the *CURRENT/LA* biennial, Chin and his collaborators distributed several hundreds of blueprints to visitors. Since this did not meet his initial goal of up to 500 new gardens, during the months after the biennial, the *TIE that BINDS "*Follow Through Crew" consisting of the volunteer "Mirror Makers" and others have continued efforts to distribute additional blueprints: with each new garden, the project keeps growing more water is conserved. Critical to this huge endeavor and collective effort, is the cumulative result that could potentially save millions of gallons of water.

Like many of Chin's other large-scale, ambitious projects and other social practice work, the ultimate success of *TIE that BINDS* was—and still is— highly dependent on collaborators, volunteers and also the public who chose to participate. Ultimately, the *TIE that BINDS* remains a project that is still in process. Those who committed to having a "mirror garden" at their home contributed to the larger whole: *The TIE that BINDS,* is a living sculpture that is collectively "owned" by the public who participate. At the original and propagated throughout Los Angeles, this land project forges a unique relationship between people and plants to address water conservation, one of the most critical challenges facing Californians today.

The TIE that BINDS was realized in partnership with the California State Parks and Clockshop. The landscape concept and garden designs were a collaboration between the artist Mel Chin and landscape architects Calvin Abe and Glen Dake, with advice from Lili Singer of the Theodore Payne Foundation for Wildflowers and Native Plants. Garden installations and additional support provided by Pierre Landscape, with plants generously supported by Village Nursery. Additional partners include designer Tom Kracauer; California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; USC Roski School of Art and Design; and Otis College of Art and Design.

Kori Newkirk's *Prime*: Enigmatic Equines

By Karen Moss

South Weddington Park, a peaceful green area along the LA River in Studio City in the San Fernando Valley, is a neighborhood named for its entertainment-industry businesses. More specifically, actor and film director/producer Mack Sennett gave neighborhood this moniker when he established a studio there in 1927, which is now the CBS Studio Center.
It also located across the street from the famous Universal Studios, known more for its theme park than as a site for producing of film and television. South Weddington Park is a welcome a bit of nature in the midst of the looming entertainment culture complex. It is a place for respite and recreation, often populated by people having leisurely picnics on the lawn or playing baseball or softball on the diamond.

In the distance beyond the diamond and the grassy fields, during CURRENT/LA one could discover a curious site: Kori Newkirk's installation, *Prime*, a trio of large, light gray horses submerged slightly below the ground and standing in a trench behind a chain link fence.
Two of the horses had one of their hooves planted in a bucket filled with pennies, while the third horse had 10 small buckets filled with clear crystals suspended over its back with ropes. Other oddities included a black starfish on the grass, and a large mound of dirt randomly piled nearby. From afar, these enormous horses seemed quite real, but after closer inspection, one could see they were fabricated from fiberglass and painted in gray prime: statuesque, but static. Appearing frozen in time and space, these artificial and uncanny animals stood on shiny,

white plastic squares. It was actually somewhat of a relief to realize these were not living creatures held captive in some kind of a compound, but a sculptural installation. That said, Newkirks's *Prime* was strange, surreal, and totally out of context in the park. One could not help but wonder: why was it there and what was its significance? Ultimately, these equines are totally enigmatic: they became open signifiers or empty slates onto which each viewer could project multiple meanings and interpretive them in different ways.

Historically, horses have been symbols of power and wealth, loyalty and diligence, virility and sexuality. Within the context of Los Angeles, some may see them as a reminder of the West when wild horses ran freely across this landscape before they were tamed and used to conquer and construct civilizations. This evocation of unbridled freedom symbolized by a cowboy riding a galloping is, of course, a staple cliché of Western films, so many of which have been shot in the San Fernando Valley. And why were these stately, man-made horses adorned with sparkles and carrying buckets of shiny pennies? Was this a nod to the glitz, glamour, and artifice of Hollywood and a reference to the billion-dollar entertainment industry just across the street?

Encountering Newkirk's Prime in the park, some may have initially thought that they had stumbled upon some kind of ruin of a monument or fountain. In his Los *Angeles Times* article about the *CURRENT: LA* public art biennial, art critic Christopher Knight commented that Newkirk's work loosely reference the Nicola Salvi's, *Trevi Fountain*, the dramatic Baroque sculpture of galloping horses and rushing water that marks the terminus of an ancient aqueduct in Rome but he observes that "its rearing horses are here static and mass-produced." [1] Indeed,

water cannot be found anywhere beneath the hooves of the sunken, stone-like horses, and it has ceased to flow in the adjacent LA Riverbed.

Perhaps we must read that Newkirk's installation must be seen as a metaphor for the more serious indictment of the uneasy relationship between water and power in Los Angeles. More than a century ago William Mullholland built the Los Angeles Aqueduct and diverted water from the Owens Valley to the San Fernando Valley, initiating the California Water Waters: the diversion depleted the irrigation resources and threatened the agricultural industry. Today, the economic and political complexities of water in LA continue, but now because of the inevitable effects of climate change.

While Newkirk's critique is also a bit tongue and cheek—it might also reference to mythical idea that a horse can magically beat a hoof to bring forth water, however, this idea seems even more absurd in the midst of a 5-year drought. Whatever one conjures in their imagination, these are not traditional, gallant horses: they are strange and pitiful, weirdly trapped in a trench near a concretized river, all dressed up but sadly, nowhere to go. Ultimately, Newkirk's work is simultaneously a remembrance of things past, a snapshot of the moment, and also a glimpse of the future.

[1] Christopher Knight**, "***Current: LA* art biennial*," Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 2016.