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A Makeover for Trash; Now, Its Art

By Patricia Leigh Brown

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SAN FRANCISCO, Jan. 25 - The air-kissers with the interesting eyewear were all there. It was the art opening of the season, and the cognoscenti gathered to sip chardonnay and wax poetic about the work on display at one of the city's most prestigious galleries: the dump.

"It's very textural, very architectonic," said Hector Dio Mendoza, a sculptor from San Jose, speaking of his 15-foot plastic foam tree, a work of haunting, austere beauty representative of what might be called the Trash Can School. "I love the way light reflects off the Styrofoam."

Mr. Mendoza holds one of the most coveted positions in the San Francisco art world: one of three current artists in residence at the San Francisco Solid Waste Transfer and Recycling Center, a fragrant 44-acre font of inspiration otherwise known as the dump. About 500 gallery-hoppers attended the most recent opening, last Friday night, venturing about eight miles south of downtown to a service road lined by seagulls in Hitchcockian thousands.

The open studio was the seasonal highlight of a program that gives a rotating roster of jury-selected artists access to the city's garbage.

Founded in 1990 by a local artist and administered by Norcal Waste Systems, the company that picks up and recycles San Francisco's garbage, the program has become a bona fide phenomenon here. It is deeply expressive of a place where recycling is practically a religion and personal expression and environmental politics are urban dogma.

Artists like Mr. Mendoza set up shop in a studio at the dump (items that cannot be recycled wind up at a landfill east of the city). Decked out in fashionable steel-toed boots and hard hats, they comb through 75 tons a day of eclectic debris - discarded CD boxes, dead microwave ovens and the like. The resulting artwork, like Mark Faigenbaum's "Raymond Chandler" - a noirish tableau created from salvaged bullets and a 1930's circuit panel spattered with what appeared to be vintage blood - underscores the city's status as the nation's capital of recycling. Currently, 63 percent of its garbage is recycled.

The promotion of garbage as a "visual resource" is meant to inspire the public to be less wasteful and to help the city achieve a recycling goal of 75 percent by 2010.

"A lot about San Francisco is outside the box, including dealing with garbage in a thoughtful way," said Kate Krebs, executive director of the National Recycling Coalition, a nonprofit organization in Washington.

Norcal Waste Systems has also pioneered an ambitious compost program in which vineyards in Napa and Sonoma Counties nourish their soil with four-star leftovers from the city's restaurants.



In the unbiodegradable, art endures. At the opening, Flash Hopkins, a local artist, surveyed Mr. Mendoza's "Artificial Nature," an assemblage of packing peanuts configured to resemble coral. Mr. Hopkins worked with Dana Albany, a previous artist in residence, on a sailboat made of books, its sails ripped-out pages from "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey."

"It's amazing what people throw away," Mr. Hopkins said of the objects rescued from the recycling building, a cathedral of garbage where the strains of "Moonlight Sonata," piped in by stereo, could be heard over the drone of Caterpillars. "It's very powerful."

The artists in residence, some 50 since the program began, are financed through 2 cents of the \$18.90 a month San Francisco residents pay for garbage collection. Each artist receives a \$1,800 stipend, though it has been temporarily suspended because of the downturn in the city's economy.

The program was the brainchild of Jo Hanson, an artist and a former city arts commissioner, who began picking up trash blowing along her sidewalk in the 1970's and befriended the sanitation workers.

"What you see in a street full of trash," Ms. Hanson said, "is that most of what's thrown away need never have existed."

She was convinced that art made from trash would appeal to people's emotions about waste. "People change their ways only when their hearts are touched," Ms. Hanson said.

New York is the only other city with an artist officially designated to work with garbage. Since 1977, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 65, has been the sole artist in residence for the city's sanitation department, working on a conceptual piece on the former Fresh Kills Landfill in Staten Island, from a studio in Lower Manhattan. In contrast to New York, Ms. Ukeles said, San Francisco's rotating artists are selected by a jury, own their own work and are physically based at the dump. "I was always jealous, honestly," she said.

The most poignant monument to San Francisco trash may be the sculpture garden on a hillside overlooking the dump, where paths of crushed concrete - salvaged from the destruction of the Embarcadero Freeway - wind through olive trees and native plants to resurrected garbage, including a dragonfly with bent propeller wings.

The opportunity to explore the detritus of consumer culture can be profound, the artists say.

"It makes you think about the temporality of human existence," said Dee Hibbert Jones, a juror and an assistant professor of sculpture and public art at the University of California, Santa Cruz. "You see how whole sections of lives end up in the dump."

Jose Tovar, a load checker at the dump, helps the artists navigate the welter of plastic trucks no longer played with, scrapbooks no longer cherished, consumer electronics tossed out for the next big thing.

"In Mexico, people reuse and reuse and reuse," said Mr. Tovar, a native of that country. "I feel relieved when these artists reuse this stuff. Here in the U.S., we can always create more."