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Art-chitecture?

L.A.'s avant-garde architects cross over into the realm of fine art. | *By Marissa Gluck* |

Along 4th Street, past the glitzy, rehabilitated Santa Monica Place mall and looming above the tourists and shoppers, hang approximately 350 mirror-polished stainless steel spheres. Suspended by cables from a single bracket on the wall of the parking garage, the orbs are the most recent local public art project by one of L.A.'s hottest architectural design firms, Ball-Nogues Studio.

Titled *Cradle*, the piece was inspired by Newton's Cradle, the popular pendulum toy found on high-powered executives' desks (think: The Sharper Image catalogue). With each sphere held in place by gravity, the undulating sculpture resembles sea foam or coral. "Hopefully it walks the line between the familiar and something completely alien," says designer Benjamin Ball. "That's where you can provoke imagination in the viewer."

Ball and his partner Gaston Nogues, both 42, are graduates of L.A.'s Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) and alums of Frank Gehry's architectural firm. But traditional architecture certainly is not what has put them on the map—instead, it's a string of dazzling public art commissions and exhibitions at major art museums, from MOCA and LACMA to the Guggenheim. Ball and Nogues, along with such avant-garde L.A. architects as Susan Narduli and Greg Lynn, are among a leading wave of industry talent who are swiftly moving into the public art sector and snatching up commissions that were once reserved for fine artists.

"The barriers between disciplines have broken down," says Narduli, another ex-Gehry-ite with an undergrad degree in sculpture from Cal State Long Beach and a master's in architecture from UCLA. Narduli is uniquely positioned to know, as her West L.A.-based Narduli Studio, an "interdisciplinary design practice," has worked on everything from residential redos to pocket parks and memorials. And her latest artistic signatures—soothing, ethereal light installations—currently grace the grounds at Cal State Fresno as well as local public plazas.

HIGH ART Ball-Nogues Studio's *Cradle* at the newly renovated Santa Monica Place mall



Ball-Nogues, founded in 2004 and located in Boyle Heights, uses relatively humble materials such as colored string, cloth and paper to create massive yet refined works of art. In addition to *Cradle*, the team recently completed a temporary installation of interlocked tables at UCLA's music school and a monumental arch of pulped paper letters and numbers for LACMA's off-site gallery at the Charles W. White school, while continuing work on a permanent commission for LAX's reimagined Tom Bradley International Terminal.

Venice-based starchitect Greg Lynn has unexpectedly found himself playing in the realm of public art, though he's more circumspect **CONTINUED...**

Greg Lynn's *Fountain* sculpture at the Hammer Museum

... CONTINUED about crossing the invisible barrier between art and architecture. "For me, it's a delicate balance," he says. "I'm careful not to think of what I do as art or sculpture." Yet visitors to the Hammer Museum's courtyard this past summer were treated to Lynn's *Fountain* sculpture—a functioning fountain made from large, plastic children's toys, reassembled in multiple layers, with a nod to Bernini's fountains in Rome. The work had all the markings of the art/architecture overlap: It was part of an ongoing site-specific art series called Hammer Projects and was guest-curated by architectural historian and UCLA professor Sylvia Lavin.

In the past, most public art projects in L.A., especially those under the purview of the city-mandated Public Percent for Art Program (i.e., art in city-owned buildings and parks), took the form of what is referred to derisively by many as "plop art." The term typically suggests enormous sculptures or murals in plazas or entrances—picture Claes Oldenburg's and Coosje van Bruggen's giant binoculars at the Frank Gehry-designed office building on Main Street in Venice. Traditionally, there hasn't been much collaboration "between artists, architects and the landscape," says Susan Gray, cultural planner at L.A.'s Community Redevelopment Agency. The success of Ball-Nogues and other rising colleagues, however, signals a movement toward a new era.

One advantage architects may have over candidates who come from a purely art-based background is an understanding of how materials can withstand wear and tear, as well as the skills to design and fabricate complex construction. The trend toward temporary installations—in everything from pop-up galleries to pop-up restaurants—also lets architects experiment with creating art.

Shining examples of this have been seen for the last two years at the annual Coachella music festival, which has provided younger architects with the opportunity to design colossal art installations. Ball-Nogues Studio, with the help of students from SCI-Arc, produced a twisting, lighted sculptural piece in 2009 for festivalgoers, while the architects in a loosely formed consortium called Crimson Collective designed last year's giant fabric and aluminum crane, *Ascension*. The desert lends itself to such unconventional art-architecture: The so-called High Desert Test Sites, a series of experimental art installations co-founded by sculptor Andrea Zittel, has over the past few years begun to feature the work of L.A.-based architectural designers Linda Taalman, Primitivo Suarez-Wolfe and R. Scott Mitchell.

Still, current High Desert Test Sites curator Robert Stone is careful to distinguish between the two fields, arguing that each has its own history,



From above: Narduli Studio's *Columbarium* at Chapman University's All Faiths Chapel; the firm's sculptural screen curtain at a multi-purpose performance space at CalArts

Crimson Collective's *Ascension* crane at the Coachella music festival in 2010



discourse and practices that can be at odds with the other. "There is no particular distinction between art and architecture in the program—a project is either interesting or it isn't—but to consider them the same thing is a disservice to both," he says. Artist Chris Burden, who has described his already-iconic 2008 street lamp fantasia *Urban Light* at LACMA as "a building with a roof of light," adds that art and architecture "may be two parallel worlds but they don't intersect." Burden contends that he isn't necessarily convinced what these genre-busting architects are now engaging in is art: "What they do is driven by architecture and set design and having to deal with a specific practical problem. Art has no 'use.'" **A**