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Courtyard Vortex

materials

An L.A. gallery's summer installation gives dramatic form to its material focus.

Maximilian's Schell is the latest in a series of courtyard installations at Materials & Applications (M&A), a gallery/lab wedged between two Spanish-style houses on a busy thoroughfare in the Silverlake neighborhood of Los Angeles. The dazzling tornado-shaped canopy may provide shade from the sun and look like a solar flare, but according to the architects it takes its inspiration from the way black holes—vortices completely devoid of light—"warp the flow of space."

Gallerist Jenna Didier and her partner, Oliver Hess, conceived of M&A as an exhibit space that would produce six-month-long installations that were more than just displays. "We were interested in exposing the whole process of building things and having the end result be sort of experimental," Didier says. So when local architects Benjamin Ball and Gaston Nogués first proposed a structure—knowing that they wanted to explore tiling techniques but not knowing precisely how it would be built—she considered it a perfect scenario.

"We can help bridge the gap between what's on the screen and what happens when you're on the site," says Didier, who designs and engineers fountains (her company, Fountainhead, provides much of the funding for M&A). Both Didier and Hess have plenty of hands-on building experience; the two have spent time in scenic design, special effects, and the



Materials & Applications' current shade-giving installation, which runs through November, is composed of reinforced Mylar "tiles" that were cut on a CNC mill.

serious robot-building underworld of San Francisco. Since it opened in 2002 the gallery has gradually attracted a group of like-minded volunteers—for the most part other architects and designers—who help assemble the biannual installations. Such expertise is especially valuable to younger architects as they learn how to fabricate software-designed models.

Ball and Nogués spent six months researching various materials, finally settling on nylon-reinforced Mylar that would be strong enough to withstand the tension of stretching across the courtyard through the summer and into November. "For me the installation is very successful," Didier says, "in that it forced the architects to go through a very rigorous exploration where they're actively seeking something to fit a structure."

Several recent submissions have been inspired by origami techniques, a growing trend in experimental architecture that Didier is hoping to exhibit soon. "It's evolving," Didier says of the program. "One exhibition will spark ideas and new lines of investigation. In this huge city it's been really helpful to have a space like this. It's like a little beacon."

—Jade Chang 🍷