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Barbara Kruger goes back to school



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ANOTHER : Conceptual artist Barbara Kruger's giant clocks installation dominates student center at UC San Diego. (Philipp Scholz Rittermann, xx)

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

LA JOLLA -- As your eyes plot the final few steps down the central staircase in UC San Diego's new student center, they land on a red terrazzo text panel that reads: "Perfect order is the forerunner of perfect horror." Not exactly a soft landing but certainly an interesting one. Not far from that Carlos Fuentes quote is one in charcoal tones from Franz Kafka: "The meaning of life is that it stops."

Elsewhere beneath the chairs and tables of the Price Center East's airy food court, pithy comments from Virginia Woolf, Malcolm X, Hannah Arendt, Robert Frost, Confucius and others are strewn across the floor like so many scattered tickets to greater awareness.

The quotes are part of a recently completed installation by Barbara Kruger, the 17th addition to the campus' distinguished Stuart Collection. Across a 40-by-80-foot wall in the atrium, Kruger has stretched a giant photomural of two stilled clock faces. Colored rectangular panels resembling those on the floor overlay the timepieces and read like a rhythmic chant: "Another day," "Another dream," "Another place," "Another loss," "Another job," "Another love," "Another dollar," "Another game," and so on. Through each clock face runs an LED news ticker with a continuous feed of the day's headlines.

An estimated 20,000 people will pass through the building (which is open 24/7) daily to eat, meet, study, attend performances and other events.

"At a museum or gallery, people are not going to come back every day, but here they do," said Kruger, in town from L.A. to inaugurate the piece, titled "Another." "That's what I love about this site -- the accretion of meaning in pieces, which is the way so many people, especially young people, come to the world today, or how the world comes to them, through meaning in pieces."

Finding her niche

Kruger, 63, started combining text and found photographic images in her own art after years working as an art director and picture editor for several major magazines in New York. Like the Dadaists of the early 20th century, whose collage and montage aesthetic resonated with the new fragmentation of modern life, her work complicates today's fast-moving visual stream, interjecting challenges and questions to do with gender, power, consumerism and more.

“I shop therefore I am” reads one of her more famous prints. The words are hers; the images she incorporates them into come from old photo annuals, technical manuals and to her outdated sources. “Your body is a battleground” declares another. Since the late ‘70s, her work has appeared on billboards, bus posters, magazine and book covers, opened pages and internationally in museum and gallery exhibitions. Increasingly, it involves movement, in the form of text or video. She was the subject of a retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1999-2000 and was awarded the prestigious Golden Lion for lifetime achievement at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Her elevator installation is a permanent feature of the new Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA.

Kruger’s credentials meant little to a UCSD bookstore employee, having lunch recently with a few co-workers in the new campus center. Glancing up at the mural, he scoffed, “It’s what -- five minutes on Photoshop? It’s not that impressive.”

Others at the table nodded in agreement, though all felt the texts underfoot were “pretty cool.” Kruger selected the 33 quotes for their ability to speak to the present, though they date from vastly different places and times. Charlotte Brontë opines on the necessity of education to eradicate prejudices, Thomas Mann likens speech to civilization itself and Voltaire warns that “Those who make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.”

A microbiology student eating over his class notes took offense at one of the quotes and dismissed most of them as “trite.” A recent graduate, joining a current structural engineering major in some lunchtime Bible study, pronounced the installation “depressing,” noting in particular the Kafka quote. “The point of the art seems to be that life is meaningless,” he said. “I don’t appreciate that it’s thrown in my face all the time.”

With 27,000 students and thousands more employees calling the university home, reactions are bound to be diverse. One young woman, a psychology major, enthused

about the installation. “It’s really exciting. You don’t know right away what the message is. The quotes give you a lot to think about. It’s stimulating.”

Some of the quotes are funny, Kruger pointed out, and “some are brutal. They’re really important, especially for students, especially at this formative time, where it’s supposed to be about an accumulation of meaning and not necessarily based on belief but to foster doubt and inquisitiveness and intellectual curiosity. That’s probably incredibly idealistic, but as a teacher I think it’s my job to suggest that.”

Kruger a good fit

Kruger is on the faculty of UCLA but previously taught for five years at UCSD and is fluent with the campus environment. The 25-year-old Stuart Collection, with commissions by Alexis Smith, Michael Asher, Robert Irwin, Tim Hawkinson, William Wegman, Kiki Smith and Elizabeth Murray, among others, was a great resource while at the university, she recalls, clearly delighted that she now numbers among its artists. (The collection bears the name of its instigator and original patron, the late businessman James Stuart DeSilva.) Her work is particularly resonant with John Baldessari’s text/image installation at the entrance to the Geisel Library, Jenny Holzer’s granite table engraved with critical commentary in a courtyard across campus and Bruce Nauman’s neon-flashing “Vices and Virtues” atop a laboratory building just a hop from the new Price Center East.

“I had a daily relationship with the Price Center when I was teaching here,” she said of the original student center, adjacent to the new addition. “It’s very close to the Visual Arts building. I was here every day. I would eat here, I would meet students here. What informed the idea of ‘Another’ was everydayness -- coming to this building every day and dealing with time and the passage of it.”

Layered significance

The center bustles with the activity of students, faculty and, just weeks after opening, painters and construction workers. Its architecture by L.A.-based Mehrdad Yazdani alone conveys a sense of dynamism and motion. The vast atrium is formed by converging diagonals, rimmed with balconies that sport colorful university-produced banners exclaiming: “Eat. Shop. Play. Relax. Meet. Belong. Price Center: This is your neighborhood.”

To this busy, multipurpose, multilayered space, Kruger’s installation adds yet more purpose and more layers. Its frozen clocks jar with the persistent motion of the news feed; the text panels scattered like confetti interrupt the building’s only neutral surface, the floor.

With all that is going on in the environment and for each book-toting, snack-munching, text-messaging, iPod-connected student, “Another” may barely register, but that’s OK with Kruger.

“Some people will be more vigilant about it, but peripheral awareness is fine because of the repetition that happens. Because there is such a repeat attendance here, the peripheralness adds up in increments and becomes more of an understanding of something. I don’t expect people to sit here like it’s the Rothko chapel, but if you’re sitting in front of this for four years, it’s going to seep in.”

Also, she noted, the audience rotates. “People are here for a few years and then they leave, so it becomes new again to whoever comes here.”

Most things at UCSD eventually become invisible, one of the lunching bookstore employees lamented. Generation Y has a famously short attention span. That doesn’t bother Kruger, though, because she does too and believes her work shows it. What she cares most deeply about amid the flux and flutter is what remains constant.

“The world is so different than when I was born, and yet there are some things that do stay the same,” she said. “I try to make work about how we are to one another. It’s a creation of a kind of commentary. People through time have been struggling with this. You can read a Russian novel from 150 years ago and some of it feels so alive today. That’s the power of this commentary that sometimes we call art.”

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