UC SANTA BARBARA

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The Elephant in the Museum

It’s easy to walk down the streets of a familiar city and fail to notice what’s around us. A particular park, courtyard, or set of stairs may not even register in our minds as we focus on getting to our destination.

But what if someone plopped a 16-foot-tall white elephant in the middle of such a space? Would that startle you back into awareness of your surroundings?

Thousands of Santa Barbarans have had just that experience over the summer, thanks to Light Elephant, a “site reflective” public art project created by Iman Djouini, an assistant teaching professor at UC Santa Barbara’s College of Creative Studies and Department of Art. The nylon pachyderm has made appearances at a variety of locations around downtown Santa Barbra and beyond, including Chase Palm Park and the Mission Historical Park.

The project is culminating in an exhibit running through Oct. 3 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, upstairs in the Paseo Nuevo mall. It features the elephant itself, a colorful risograph artist book, along with video and photographic documentation of the project, and events for both children and adults.

Djouini and her partner, architectural designer Jonathan Taube, introduced the elephant in 2017 as part of a community project in Baltimore. “For us, it became a physical form of the idiom ‘the elephant in the room,’” she says. “The elephant raised different questions depending on where it popped up.”

After moving to Santa Barbara in the summer of 2020 — the height of the pandemic — they realized this would be an interesting time and place to revive it. “We’re interested in how public spaces become activated — and how the isolation of COVID was making everybody want to interact with a public environment again,” she said.

“We live very close to State Street, and take walks all the time. We have a young child, so we’re always out and about, observing and interacting. We were really interested in what was happening on State Street — how dynamics public spaces became during shut down, how the restaurants moved outside and the community found innovative ways to use the former road.”

In bringing the elephant to that thoroughfare, and subsequently documenting its visit, Djouini and Taube indirectly raised a range of questions. How do we want to utilize our public spaces in the post-pandemic era? Will things go back to ‘normal’? Should they? Are some of the changes we made over the past 18 months worthy of being made permanent?

“Wondering is an important part of observation — especially now,” Djouini said “‘What just happened in the last year?’ is an important question to ask.”

The project has an experimental social-media component, primarily on Instagram. After viewing images of the elephant at spots such as the County Courthouse, Storke Plaza, and in front of the Lobero Theatre, participants are prompted to ask basic questions such as “What has happened here?” “What is happening here?” and “What will happen here?”

“We tried to guide them, but also while providing space for people to make sense of the work in their own way,” she said. “It’s important to allow your audience to develop their own relationship to the work.”

The project has also served as a teaching device. Djouini’s students have learned about how to work with city officials, obtain permits, and collaborate with community organizations. They will utilize that knowledge in March, when they will design and implement a public art project on Stearns Wharf focusing on climate change.

Younger kids can get in on the action, too. As part of the current museum exhibit, Djouini designed a Family Friendly educational Workshop will take place on Saturday, Oct. 2 from 1 to 4 p.m. Participants from age 8 to 17 will paint and

decorate paper-mache elephants. They will then take their creations to public spaces and photograph them, just as Djouini did with her much larger creature. (Participants can register by e-mail: sklein@mcasantabarbara.org.)

Adult activities include a beer-and-wine reception featuring the creators, which will take place on Paseo Nuevo's Upper Arts Terrace from 5 to 8 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 30. Like the project itself, it's "an opportunity for us to interact with the city and learn from it, and for the city itself to reflect on what is happening," Djouini said.

A native of Algeria who earned a master's degree in printmaking, Djouini, is leaving open the possibility that she will bring the enigmatic elephant back out of hibernation at some point in the future, in Santa Barbara or elsewhere. "It's never been about the elephant," she noted. "It's about where it is. The elephant is a reminder of things that are unsaid and unmentioned. Those things are with us all the time."

Admission to the exhibit is free. More information can be found at https://www.mcasantabarbara.org/exhibition/light-elephant/.

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