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GALLERY WORLD

Making a scene

If you think of the gallery world in Los Angeles as a sort of inverted galaxy, arrayed not across the sky but over the layout of the city, its newest and brightest constellation would be floating around the intersection of La Cienega and Washington boulevards.

Five years ago, this might have seemed unlikely. Except for a few venerable landmarks — Sony Studios, the Ivy Substation, the Museum of Jurassic Technology — the landscape was semi-industrial and drearily nondescript, lined with dingy strip malls and the kind of low, stucco, barred-window buildings where you know someone's doing something (Manufacturing paintball products? Printing apocalyptic religious brochures? Plotting the overthrow of Southeast Asian dictatorships?), but where you probably wouldn't want to go knocking on doors.

As any city planner knows, however, art has a knack for inspiring urban renewal. The tide turned in this case with Blum & Poe's renovation of a 5,000-square-foot warehouse at 2754 La Cienega. Other conversions followed, bringing fresh coats of paint, stylish signage, murals, the occasional billboard project (thanks to LAXART) and commerce-generating foot traffic. The Culver City Art District's Gallery Guide (www.ccgalleryguide.com) now lists 36 spaces in all, not including the neighborhood's social lynchpin, the Mandrake — a bar/exhibition space/performance venue tucked between Taylor De Cordoba and Lizabeth Oliveria Gallery.

Not all such civic evolution attracts high-quality art, but this neighborhood's happily has. Indeed, if you have one afternoon to convince your skeptical New York guests of why L.A. matters artwise, this is where to take them. In any given week, the array of work represented will span virtually all categories — local, national and international; emerging and established; traditional genres and new media — offering an ideal cross section of contemporary art in Los Angeles.

The accompanying selection of images on this page and the Web — the first in a series intended to profile each of the city's vibrant art neighborhoods — includes some of the best of what's up in Culver City (excluding a few notable examples already covered in these pages). Newsprint and pixels are no substitute for the real thing, of course, so here's hoping it whets your appetite for more.

— HOLLY MYERS