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AROUND THE GALLERIES

Freeways connect and divide

*Ruben Ochoa explores the politics of concrete at LAXART. And more.

By Holly Myers, Special to The Times

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The story of the freeway system in Los Angeles is a story of technology, progress and efficiency, but also destruction, displacement and dissociation, as homes were uprooted and neighborhoods severed to clear the way for those swift, ostensibly placeless corridors of concrete.

This concrete has since become an ecological force in its own right, directing the currents of urban life and upholding social boundaries, so ubiquitous as to be virtually invisible.

"Extracted," a shrewd, three-pronged project by Ruben Ochoa, explores the politics of concrete by playing with its visibility. Employing trompe l'oeil effects in a number of unexpected places, he encourages viewers to look more closely at the urban structures they may otherwise take for granted.

For the exhibition component of the project, at LAXART, Ochoa dropped what appears to be a massive chunk of freeway wall — a slab of concrete 15 feet high, 18 feet wide and 14 inches deep — directly in the viewer's path, propping it against one of the gallery's walls at a roughly 45-degree angle. Filling the space between the slab and the opposite wall is a tall mound of reddish dirt that blocks passage to the back of the gallery except through a precarious-looking tunnel beneath the slab.

It is an impressive and surprisingly elegant presentation, recalling Richard Serra's trademark slabs of steel and Walter de Maria's "New York Earth Room." Tempering brute force with a delicate sense of balance, the piece makes a strong case for including Ochoa in the venerable lineage of muscular Minimalists.

Or so it would seem. Proceed under the slab to the back of the gallery and you'll find that the entire structure is hollow, built around a wood and steel frame, covered in chicken wire and burlap and just enough dirt and bonding cement to convincingly coat the surface. It is a startling discovery that raises the curious question of which is ultimately more impressive: the macho wherewithal to drag all that dirt and concrete into the gallery or the elaborate engineering involved in faking it.

The second prong of the project is a billboard above the gallery featuring one of Ochoa's photographs — an image of a cement barrier in a residential neighborhood — covered with simulated graffiti, the most prominent example of which reads "disrup." (Related freeway photographs by Ochoa are also on view a few doors away at Lizabeth Oliveria Gallery.)

The third is a public work due to appear in a few weeks — it's awaiting final city approval — in which Ochoa will drape a 60-foot section of a retaining wall along the eastbound 10 Freeway (beneath North Soto and Marengo streets) with a photographic mural portraying the same wall with two large portions extracted to reveal the hillside beyond. An edition of lithographs based on the same image also is included in the LAXART exhibition.

It's heartening to see a public work that aims not to celebrate, decorate and pacify but to interrogate and challenge. Like the gallery installation, the piece illuminates the ideological power of these architectural structures only to undermine that power by gutting them. These are walls that shape the life of the city, protecting the rich from contact with the poor, dividing ethnic and cultural enclaves, exacerbating the alienation of commuters. To posit for even a moment, in just one spot on the long, bland stretch of the eastbound 10, the possibility of looking beyond these walls opens up an exhilarating opportunity for imagining the city differently.