

ART REVIEW



Bernar Venet's "Indeterminate Lines" sculptures (example below) seem to careen across a landscape, while his "Classic Arc" series (details above) rely on a more orderly geometry; 13 examples are on view locally for a year. *Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune*

HE COVERS THE WATERFRONT

It took a team to give form to Bernar Venet's solo show about form; the artist's sculptures make an unusual outdoor exhibit

By **Robert L. Pincus**
ART CRITIC

Artists evolve in ways you could never anticipate, and that unpredictability is one of the pleasures of art.

Consider Bernar Venet. As an emerging conceptual artist in France, in the 1960s and 1970s, he made pointedly non-aesthetic works from tar, both sculptural and painting-like. He then turned to creating mixed-media wall works rooted in mathematical measurements, some of which are in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, which gave him a solo exhibition in 1976.

After gaining a considerable reputation for his anti-sculptural sculptures, performances and precise wall works, he stopped making art for a few years. Since he was interested in ideas more than objects, this seemed right.

Probably few would guess that this is the one and the same artist whose large steel sculptures of lines and arcs are now visible at sites along the downtown waterfront, at the airport, on the grounds of two museums, in front of downtown hotels and at Liberty Station in Point Loma. There's plenty of time to see "Monumental Works," too. They'll be on view through Oct. 31, 2009.

SEE Venet, E7



▶ **VENET**

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Embarcadero is a good site for artist's works

Scott White Contemporary Art in Little Italy, Venet's West Coast gallery, is the driving force behind the project, for which White gained a collaborator, the Port of San Diego, and smaller scale cooperation from the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego and the San Diego Museum of Art. White has funded the lion's share of the \$400,000 it cost to bring these works here from Florida, where several were on view, and New York, where the artist lives and works. The Port contributed installation costs for the works at sites in its purview.

Curatorially, it's unorthodox for an outdoor show on this scale to be generated by a gallery. White hopes to benefit commercially, of course. Six of the works are available for purchase. What better way to promote an artist like this than to have his work seen in picturesque settings? But he's also giving the city a bona fide solo exhibition for an artist with a considerable international reputation — something the Port of San Diego hasn't been able, or has been unwilling, to do on its own.

It's clear this is in part a project of passion for him.

"This is huge for me," says White. "It's a large investment, financially, physically and mentally. But I think he's a tremendous artist."

In a sense, this exhibition for Venet expands on a notion that has appealed to the Port recently: collaborate to obtain worthwhile art on a temporary basis. The best example is Magdalena Abakanowicz's affecting group of 9-foot-tall "Walking Figures," on view along Harbor Drive just south of the San Diego Convention Center. The public art program of San Diego's Commission for Arts and Culture first arranged for this piece, as it did for Dennis Oppenheim's "Engagement"

on the traffic median between Laurel Street and Harbor Drive, a middling work by that well-known artist. The two agencies shared the cost and the Port provided the sites.

The 13 Venet works on view give you a broad idea of his sculpture. His art isn't topical in the least; he's not trying to offer a view or exert influence on any social or political issue. This work isn't expressive either, in a personal sense; it won't tell you anything about the state of the artist's psyche.

It's form, pure and simple — that is, if pure and simple can be taken to mean art that is without symbolism or overt cultural reference. Form is their subject; they are about what can be done with line, straight, curved or gnarled. A particular sculpture can consist of one line or many.

Conceptual sculptor

Venet, who generally leans toward subtle effects, isn't adverse to visual drama. "Twelve Straight Lines," which rises from a Harbor Island traffic island to a height of 29 feet, 6 inches, will likely cause some drivers to slow down and do a little rubbernecking.

It might sound off-the-wall to classify this massive sculpture, with its architectural scale, as conceptual art. After all, don't conceptual artists display a general disregard for the object? But Sol Lewitt, one of the inventors of conceptual art, explained his own sculptures and wall drawings by saying, "The idea is the machine that makes the art."

And Venet would agree, one suspects. His sculptures are part of a self-generated system of lines and arcs. He settles on the degree of a curve and then decides how many curved lines there should be in a given work. One large example, at Embarcadero Marina Park South, is "97.5° Arc x 9." It's tall, too, which the title doesn't disclose: 25 feet. Its nine tightly grouped lines in steel — each line is a slender, four-sided form — look as if they are bending in the wind.

This work and others are simple in form, but not so sim-

Bernar Venet's 25-foot-tall "97.5° Arc x 9" is now on view at Embarcadero Marina Park South.
Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune



ple in effect. You know these are solidly made lines, and yet they look somehow soft, as if they might straighten up once the imagined wind subsides.

Critic Thomas McEvilley wrote that Venet has long been interested in concepts that cut across different media. So, it's no coincidence that his arcs resemble three-dimensional lines drawn in real space and his "indeterminate line" pieces do, too.

The line and arc pieces seem systematic, while his "indeterminate line" works are their motley counterpart. Imagine a hand drawing lines with a sense of abandon, corkscrewing across a page; then, transfer that image on a larger scale to three dimensions and you'll have some notion of sculptures like "Four Indeterminate Lines" at the Embarcadero Marina Park North and "Three Indeterminate

example, essentially a slender arc on a base, simply looks like a tired modernist abstraction.

The Embarcadero is a good site for a spectrum of Venet's works, which benefit from leisurely viewing and seeing them from all views. Take the time to walk around one or two; you'll probably be surprised how different a single work can look from varied vantage points. Accessibility is a large plus, too, which is not the case with "Three Indeterminate Lines." It's located on what's called the Memorial Lawn at Lindbergh Field, since there is a plaque that pays tribute to the victims of Sept. 11. Cars fly by and pedestrians are scarce at that end of Terminal 1. To find the sculpture requires effort, so it seems destined to have a small audience.

Venet is an estimable sculptor, who took his commitment to an art of ideas and found a formally elegant way of extending it into three dimensions. Their uniform rust patina is part of their appeal. He didn't break new ground, in the way that a Richard Serra or a Donald Judd did, but whether you like or dislike Venet's work, seeing it is an opportunity worth having.

His sculpture does something that serious sculpture manages to accomplish: making us feel our sense of a medium and three-dimensional form is enlarged. Maybe you'll take the time to see all of the Venets. Maybe you'll be content to just run into a couple of them. Either way, having the chance to do so is the point of having serious art in the civic landscape. It's part of an ongoing dialogue about what kind of city people want to have.

On a spectrum of art, with provocative, boldy innovative works at one end of a continuum and easy kitsch at the other, Venet's work is somewhere in the middle: tasteful, intelligently conceived and visually pleasing. It will probably wear well and in that sense it will improve the climate for public art in a town that has often been suspicious of it. This seems like a good thing.

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WORKS BY BERNAR VENET IN SAN DIEGO

- "228.5° Arc x 5" (2003), outside the San Diego Museum of Art, Balboa Park
- "240.5° Arc x 2" (1990), Museum of Contemporary Art, downtown San Diego, plaza just south of the 1001 Kettner Blvd. building
- "223.5° Arc x 5" (2003), in front of the Omni Hotel, 675 L St., downtown San Diego
- "Three Indeterminate Lines" (2003), in front of the Marriott Hotel, 333 W. Harbor Drive, downtown San Diego
- "12 Straight Lines" (2007), Harbor Island median
- "Random Combination of Indeterminate Lines" (1990), Harbor Island median
- "Arcs in Disorder: 4 Arcs x 5" (2002), Laurel Street median, at Harbor Drive
- "220.5° Arc x 15" (2006), Embarcadero Marina Park South
- "221.5° Arc x 28" (2008), Embarcadero Marina Park North, kite flying lawn
- "Four Indeterminate Lines" (1997), Embarcadero Marina Park North
- "97.5° Arc x 9" (2007), Embarcadero Marina Park South
- "Three Indeterminate Lines" (2005), San Diego International Airport, Memorial Lawn (between Terminal 1 and Terminal 2)
- "228° Arc x 10" (2003) at Liberty Station / Naval Training Center

The details: Works will be on view through Oct. 31, 2009. Scott White Contemporary Art is also presenting a gallery exhibition of the artist from Nov. 7 through Jan. 3 that will include eight sculptures, ranging from maquettes to large-scale works in steel, as well as four pastel on paper drawings.

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— ROBERT L. PINCUS