

Arts And Leisure: Andrea Zittel from A to Z

by Robert L. Pincus

LOS ANGELES - Andrea Zittel makes unusual dresses. She's designed personal escape vehicles and once dreamed up "deserted islands" in fiberglass for New York's Central Park pond. She's created "living units" for domestic interiors and "breeding units" intended to yield a "more original form of poultry."

You can see examples of these endeavors, and others, from this multidimensional artist in "Andrea Zittel: Critical Space," her biggest museum exhibition to date and her first in Southern California. The nationally touring show, organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, inside its sprawling Geffen Contemporary space in Little Tokyo.

CRITICAL SPACE - Andrea Zittel has customized trailers for her collectors since the mid-1990s, turning them into 'A-Z Escape Vehicles.' This trio was first exhibited in 1996. Photo by Bill Orcutt. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery. Copyright by Andrea Zittel.

It's unthinkable that the show wouldn't have had a Southern California venue. The 41-year-old Zittel is a native of Escondido, Calif., after all, who did her undergraduate work at San Diego State University and returned to the West Coast from New York in 1997, establishing herself in Joshua Tree, Calif.

Her work is conceptual art that wants to charm and amuse you, even while it gently challenges preconceptions about contemporary life. How can anyone not take a shine to her personal uniforms (some crocheted without a needle)? Or not be delighted by a mini-trailer that resembles a grotto on the inside? She is a relentless experimenter who adopts the identity of a small company. Zittel doesn't sign her name but uses the moniker A-Z Enterprises. Her studio is dubbed A-Z West. (A-Z East, her earlier studio/showroom in Brooklyn, is dormant.)

Zittel's mission isn't so much to design this or that functional object, even if they are usable, but to scrutinize the most ordinary aspects of life, from organizing a room to sleeping. "Critical Space," co-curated by Paola Morsiani and Trevor Smith, is titled in this vein.

In her art, the spirit of Ralph Waldo Emerson, with his idea of an original relationship to the universe, meets that of Buckminster Fuller, with his zest for rethinking our relationship to architecture and technology. She believes in a better-designed life, which also pays homage to utopian-minded modernists of the early 1900s, like the Bauhaus group in Germany - but with downsized expectations.

"Mine is a small social vision, not grand like in the early 20th century," Zittel says. "As small as a utensil. Something we take for granted."

Still, she probably would be sympathetic to Emerson's more all-encompassing vision from his famous essay "Self-Reliance" (1841): "We want men and women who shall renovate life and our social state." Looking at the sweep of her work in "Critical Space," one finds a relentless drive toward a critical approach to just about anything.

Her breakthrough came in the early 1990s, as a reaction to living in confined quarters in New York, after grad school. She made the most of her 200-square-foot living space with the "A to Z Management and Maintenance Unit" (1992). Its stylistic innovations were modest, as she claimed. Clean straightedge dominated, punctuated by round windows on cupboards and by oval mirrors. And her approach suggested a revival of a role that the Bauhaus school practiced decades earlier: the artist as social engineer.

Zittel's ideas burgeoned after that. She made "A-Z Comfort Units," divided into bed, dining area, vanity, office and an additional unit to be customized. (She completed them for museums as well as collectors.) She devised sleeping arrangements like the "A-Z Blanket Bed" (1993), combining comforter mattress and sleeping bag into one unit.

The experimentalist in Zittel led her to create "A-Z Breeding Unit for Averaging Eight Breeds" (1993), which has a stylistic consistency with some of her units for humans. In one breeding experiment, she took domestically created breeds and crossbred them to reduce the unique traits. It was as if she was reversing human intervention to revive the "average chicken."

She's never lost interest in small spaces, but larger ones - bigger even than trailers - have drawn her attention in the last few years. Zittel has been making forms resembling rocks, fashioned from sculptured foam, which she calls "Rough Furniture." In the museum, they look rather elegant flanking her "A-Z Homestead Unit," an architectural prototype inspired by the small cabins of decades ago that dot the desert.

The unit can be a room (as one collector uses it) or an entire dwelling. In fact, it's small enough, at 120 square feet, not to require a building permit. Zittel seems to have lost none of her passion or ingenuity either. If anything, she's become clearer about the ideas animating her work and life. She's even written some of them down as "These things I know for sure." (You can read all of them in the museum or in the accompanying catalog.)

One of those "things" is particularly relevant. It reads: "Ideas seem to gestate best in a void - when that void is filled, it is more difficult to access them. In our consumption-driven society, almost all voids are filled, blocking moments of greater clarity and creativity. Things that block voids are called 'avoids.'"

She is dedicated to finding voids she can fill with her own furniture, vehicles and so forth. The essential thing

to avoid is the mindset of the mall, which emphasizes passivity rather than creativity, as she sees it.

Her small changes to the world coax us to think about big things like our relationship to possessions, people, society and nature. In the process, she amuses and challenges us - which is the right combination of qualities for an artist who wants to have a philosophical dialogue with both collectors and viewers.

IF YOU GO

"Andrea Zittel: Critical Space"

Through May 13

The Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 152 N. Central Ave., Los Angeles

\$8; \$5, students and seniors; free to children under 12

213-626-6222 or www.moca.org

June 11-Sept. 13

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