

"Tunnel" Vision at the Southwest Museum

Katherine Keane

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The sleeping figure.



Six sleeping heads are installed in one of the tunnel's niches.

A little over a year ago, Los Angeles artist Thomas McDonell drove past Mount Washington's Southwest Museum, now part of the Autry Museum of the American West, and was inspired.

"It was closed most of the time and finally when I was able to visit for the first time, it occurred to me almost immediately that we should try to do an exhibition of work inside of the tunnel," says McDonell. "It's a pretty remarkable location."

McDonell teamed up with New York-based artist Brock Enright to create two dozen poured stone sculptures that will line the niches of the tunnel that leads from the street and continue into the museum. From January 30 until February 27, the Southwest Museum will host the contemporary art exhibition "Tunnel Entrance." Keep reading to learn about the artists' work and their inspiration for the installation.

What did you know about the Southwest Museum before you started your work?

Hardly anything. I learned really about the history of the whole museum and the tunnel and the place and Charles Lummis (founder of the Southwest Museum) all sort of at once and over the past year as we've been researching the project. Obviously later I learned about the collection and how substantial it is. But I didn't know much.

The majority of the installation is in the tunnel entrance. What is so unique about this space?

What people say—it's sort of half way a joke, but also half way true—is that when they built the museum in 1914 it was looking like a huge success, but what they found was attendance was surprisingly low. Then they realized that it was because the museum was

built on this hill and there was no practical pedestrian entrance, so they decided to burrow this tunnel into the side of the mountain to make it easier for people [coming] from downtown or Pasadena. The tunnel is 281 feet long, so it's quite long and narrow and walking through it can be disorienting. The sound inside is very special; the whole place is luminal.



The installation continues onto the veranda.



A hand holds a bouquet.

How did the space inspire your installation?

The installation runs around a central idea or form, which is a sleeping figure, and that figure is the artist Brock Enright. And so there are other objects inside of the niches that line the tunnel walls but the main recurring element is this figurative sculpture of a sleeping man. The idea of this is sort of a response to the feeling of the tunnel and the architecture of the space. Like with any art, the idea is to make available an opportunity for closer looking or reexamination or looking in a different way. The exhibition continues into the museum from inside the tunnel with a couple of sculptures and installed inside of a more permanent exhibition of the museum upstairs; that exhibition is called "Four Centuries of Pueblo Pottery," so it's an exhibition of ceramics, and some of them are really old. We wanted to install the sculptures inside of this space that created a kind of dialogue with that show and maybe lent a contemporary eye to the history of object making and what that might all mean.

How do you hope this installation will serve the Southwest Museum?

The museum is doing a large-scale conservation project and in order to do that, they had to close the museum most of the time so they can work on the objects. They hadn't had a new exhibition here in a long time. A lot of people haven't been here, even people who live really close by or work really close by, just because the museum has been closed for a long time but it's really a beautiful place. So part of the idea was to open it up a little bit more and allow people to see not only this exhibition but the place itself. I think that moving forward people are talking about re-imagining this museum for other purposes. Maybe it will be a museum, maybe it could be a contemporary art museum, or a gallery, or people have talked about a cultural center of some kind. It could be a venue for a lot of things, so this is sort of an example of one use of the space and I think it could be handy for people to think about.

"Tunnel Entrance" will be open to the public from January 30 until February 27 on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.