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Revisiting a Cold War Icon

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By ANNA SCOTT 09.NOV.06

A new exhibit at the Wende Museum fuses art and geopolitics.

Cold War-era Berlin, reinterpreted through the eyes of modern American teenagers and children, made its Culver City debut last weekend at the Wende Museum.

The local Cold War museum hosted a reception Sunday afternoon to showcase 15 painted panels designed to replicate sections of the Berlin Wall and decorated by art students from Culver City High School's Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts (AVPA), members of the Los Angeles Girl Scouts and children from L.A.'s Temple Kehillat Israel and St. Agatha's Parish.

The works are the first fruits of the museum's "Berlin Wall-Los Angeles" project, a community outreach program created by museum founder Justinian Jampol to teach students about the Cold War in a way that specifically allows them to understand how politics affect everyday life.

"This is a wall that had real impact on people's lives. ... It shows you the ways in which political events very much affect people's lives," Jampol said during his introductory remarks Sunday.

"[The students' panels] reflect various aspects of division in every day life here in Los Angeles," he added. "I think they're great. We're very, very impressed with them."



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The 12-foot-high rectangular panels' colorful graphics took on topics such as the war in Iraq, symbolized by a bloody looking oil can; immigration, through small drawings depicting members of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps; and self-esteem in young women, which took the form of a collage made from magazine cut-outs of models and advertising images in the shape of a female figure.

"It was definitely a learning experience," said Culver City High School Student Alexa Griffen, 16, of participating in the project. "Because I didn't really know much about the Cold War, or the way the world was [then]. It was interesting."

The other participating groups created three panels each, including the girl scouts, some of whom attended Sunday's event and were excited to see their work on display.

"This one's awesome," said Antea Casler, 12, pointing out a panel with an environmental theme, adorned with tacked-on flowers.

"I think it gets the message across," agreed Ysa Pitman, also 12.

Two artists who did paintings on the real Berlin Wall, Judy Jensen and Norton Wisdom, appeared Sunday to speak about their experiences in Berlin during the 1980s and praised the works on display.

"These paintings here are brilliant," Wisdom said. "I think that art has a social responsibility. I think it has to be about the world we live in, and I think these things really are heartfelt. It's works like this that maybe will stop walls from being built."

After the official reception, Jampol and other museum staff led tours of the museum's exhibition space and vault, which houses more than 50,000 items.

The museum boasts one of the largest private collections of artifacts from communist Eastern Europe and the USSR, and its acquisitions include not only cultural and artistic remnants of post-war Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, but items that reflect daily life as well.

To that end, the museum's more idiosyncratic pieces include images of Stalin that were altered during de-Stalinization to make him unrecognizable, paintings and statues of Lenin that were defaced during protests in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and consumer products transformed by individuals seeking to replicate western products.

Jampol began collecting Cold War artifacts in 1994, while a student at UCLA, and the Wende Museum was opened in 2002.

The panels featured at Sunday's event will be presented next year as part of a larger event at the museum.

- Photos by Gary McCarthy