

Michael Herrman

b. 1973, Miami, FL; lives in Paris

Bruce Gardner

b. 1971, New York; lives in San Jose, CA

Ethan Miller

b. 1973, Modesto, CA; lives in San Jose, CA

Urban Observatory

2008

outdoor video projection, computer program, handmade translucent polyester-resin and fiberglass panels, freestanding structure

Artist residency, Montalvo Arts Center (Michael Herrman)

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right: Urban Observatory, installation view, Circle of Palms, San Jose
overleaf: Interior view
Photos: Everett Taasevigen



Michael Herrman's work is, according to the artist, "founded on the notion that, in architecture, space and the traditional materials of construction are drifting apart in order to respond to increasingly dynamic modes of inhabitation."

Urban Observatory, nestled in the center of the Circle of Palms in downtown San Jose, was modeled on the idea of a portable tourist information center. Its fifteen-by-fifteen-by-ten-foot-high cube-shaped steel frame and suspended walls composed of translucent panels are held together like chain mail in a flexible armature and lit from within. From the outside, the piece has an ethereal glow, a flickering mirage among the palms. Step inside, and the lighting is actually produced by four networked projectors, which Bruce Gardner and Ethan Miller programmed to create a dynamic visualization of the world. As visitors step around the space, pressure sensitive buttons in the floor allow navigation through this virtual world, and geotagged images of other locales are projected on the resin panels, conveying a sense of being in Baghdad, for example, while still in San Jose.

Inspired in part by René Magritte's 1933 Surrealist painting The Human Condition, Urban Observatory presented a physical window onto a navigable simulacrum of the world, which in an increasingly "mediatized" universe is its own reality. "The way people inhabit cities is changing because of transient populations that usurp spaces as their own for a short time," says Herrman. "Cities are permanent places, but with such buildings, we can make them flexible. It's a new kind of timeshare." [MH]

