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EMERGES



Table of Contents

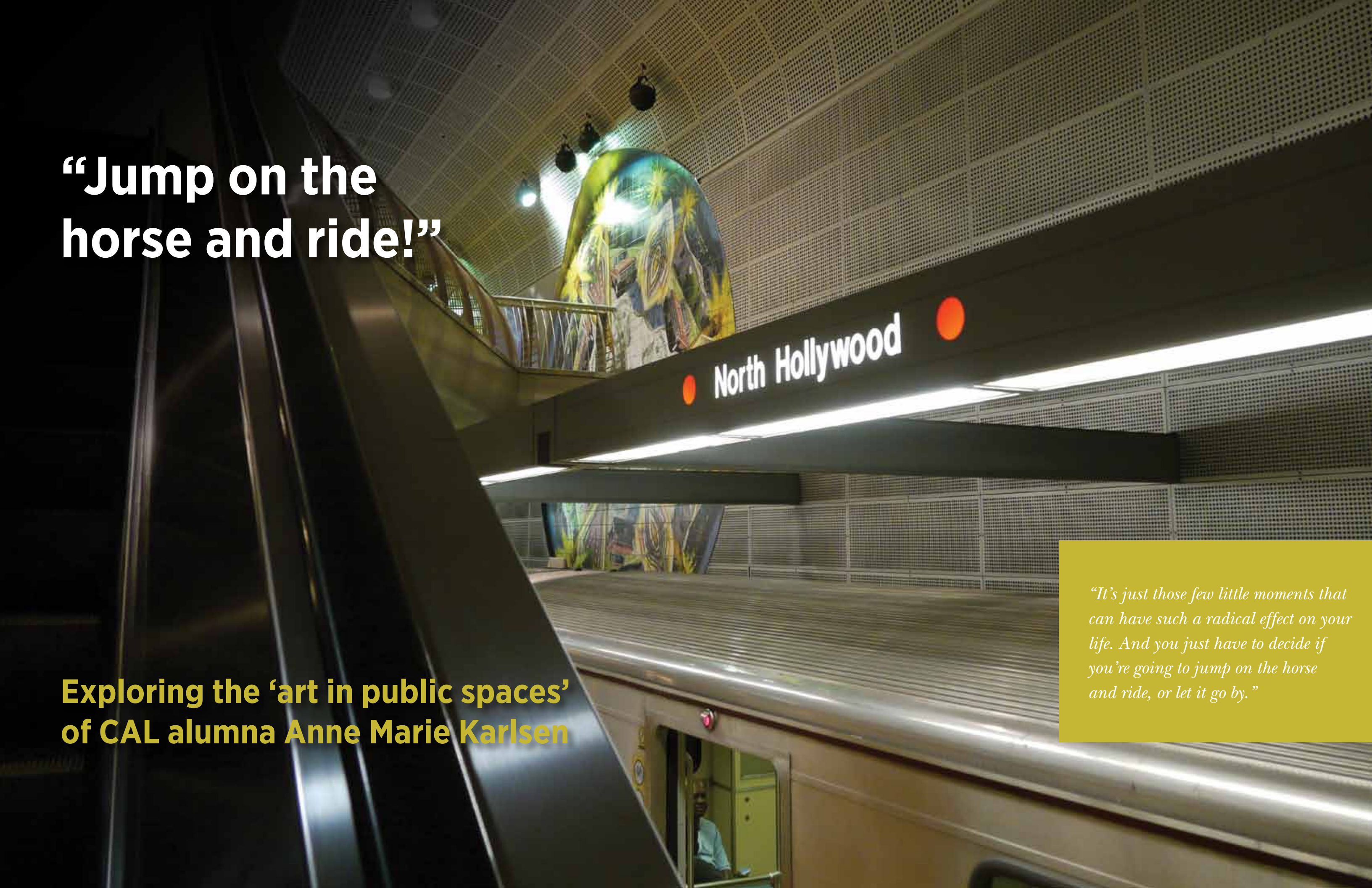
	Welcome	1		Faculty Awards & Honors	32
	 CAL's Culture of "Yes" yields Academy Awards-worthy dress	2		 CAL's 'World Languages Day' offers language and culture immersion	37
	 Sew green! Sew white! Red Carpet Green Dress II - The Sequel	9		 Wells Hall Addition Groundbreaking Held	38
	 MSU Alumnus Co-produces Academy Awards	12		Diverse Directions for MSU Theatre Department	41
	CAL Benefits from Spartan Scholarship Challenge	13		 Nothing Marginal About It	42
	 The Signature Lecture Series: Ken Burns "Superimposing order on chaos"	14		 The Signature Lecture Series: Suzan-Lori Parks "Writing is like holding the hand of God"	44
	 "Jump on the horse and ride" Exploring the 'art in public spaces' of CAL alumna Anne Marie Karlsen	18		Faculty Publishing	49
	Manufacturing Sympathies	28		 Eloísa Cartonera Cooperative Promotes Literacy Culture as it Combats Social Exclusion	56

MUSES

**“Jump on the
horse and ride!”**

**Exploring the ‘art in public spaces’
of CAL alumna Anne Marie Karlsen**

*“It’s just those few little moments that
can have such a radical effect on your
life. And you just have to decide if
you’re going to jump on the horse
and ride, or let it go by.”*





In August 1979, Anne Marie Karlsen headed west to Los Angeles, CA, from Madison, WI, as the newest faculty member – the youngest ever hired – of the University of California at Los Angeles Department of Art. Armed with a BFA in Art from Michigan State University, and an MA and MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Anne Marie has built a solid academic career including 15 years at UCLA and 24 years at Santa Monica College – nine simultaneously at both institutions.

But a ceramics class that Karlsen took for fun in 1990 opened up a whole new world for the MSU College of Arts and Letters Art and Art History alum.

“I was exhibiting a lot in L.A.,” Karlsen says, “and was represented by Newspace gallery. I was also teaching at UCLA, and felt a great deal of pressure at the time related to promotions and tenure and research, and my gallery career and everything. So, I started taking this ceramics class. And I did it sort of covertly at first, you know. Because I just wanted to go and make a set of dinner dishes,” she laughs. “Kind of therapeutically; just to have a little bit of fun.”

Karlsen adds that she started getting heavily into ceramics, and ended up putting some very big bowls that she’d done into a solo exhibition along with some of her paintings. An art consultant – Tamara Thomas of FineArt Services, who was very big in L.A. and worked across the United States – saw the exhibition.

The consultant told Anne Marie that her work would be absolutely fantastic for public art works, saying, “You need to take out the sharp corners and try to figure out how to make it in architectural scale. If you can do that, I can help you get some work.”

AN IMPORTANT LESSON

“And just on this fairly casual conversation we had at the gallery,” Karlsen says, “I decided ‘Well, I’m going to do that.’ I’m always telling my students that you never know what you’re saying ‘Yes’ to, and where it can take you. And that’s a really important lesson to learn. Because, there’s often every justification to say, ‘Oh, I have this going on, and I don’t have the time.’ But you might be missing your biggest chance.”

Of course, as an educator and artist whose work has always been firmly

grounded in research, Karlsen knew that she was up to the task. She went out and found a studio in Taos, NM, that worked with her, and helped translate her ideas into tile. Then she started producing samples and examples and, about a year later, got her first public arts commission project – an installation for the Playa Pacific Development in Culver City, CA. From there, the art in public spaces segment of Karlsen’s career was off and running.

LARGEST COMMISSION

Five years later, Karlsen landed her largest and most iconic commission. The 3,000-square-foot artwork encompassed 14 large, circular and semicircular ceramic tile wall installations that she patterned after a kaleidoscope wheel. Installed in the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s North Hollywood Red Line Subway Station in Los Angeles, the project, in Karlsen’s words, “was an enormously complicated tile fabrication and installation.”

Says Anne Marie, “It was a little scary during the construction phase of the project, because we had to climb three stories underground into the station on wooden stairs — but it was also

Previous page: “Kaleidoscope Dreams,” North Hollywood Red Line Metro Rail Station, 1997-99, Los Angeles

Top left to right: “Subdivisions,” Los Angeles County Public Library, Lawndale Branch, 2008; One of Anne Marie Karlsen’s 11 interior station tile mosaics in the North Hollywood Red Line Metro Rail Station, Los Angeles; Raymond Renaissance exterior mosaics, Pasadena, 2007; metal gate detail, Burbank Lance Townhomes, Burbank, CA, “Portal,” 2006

quite fascinating to come down here and see the whole process of building a subway station. I had to go through a lot of design meetings, and we had to work with the general contractor for the station to coordinate all of the subcontractors as they did the installation. The miracle was that we only had eight tiles that were rotated incorrectly and had to be taken out and redone. Other than that, everything came out perfectly.”

Karlsen adds that the ceramics process was quite demanding, too.

“When you fire tiles in different kilns at different times, it can change the coloration of the tiles,” she says. “But, the studio I worked with in downtown L.A., Urban Clay, had about 20 computerized kilns that could be fired simultaneously. So, they were actually able to get an entire panel into the kilns at the same time.

“If you’ve ever seen an unfired pot, the glaze is very dusty on it. Well, we had to install the tiles on a two-story false wall in the studio to spray them and do the imaging. We had to use a special tape so that in case there was any shaking, they wouldn’t fall off. Popping them off the fake wall without damaging the glaze, and getting them into the kilns was all very complicated.”

Today, Karlsen’s kaleidoscope-inspired artwork is exposed to more than 125,000 people daily. And, because the opening of the MTA’s North Hollywood Station has spurred increasing area redevelopment, those numbers are expected to continue to rise well into the foreseeable future. As is the number of Karlsen’s public arts commissions, which is approaching 30.

“What’s striking about Anne Marie Karlsen’s work is her ability to bring strong color and formal relationships to imagery in ways that allow the work to carry from different distances visually...”

“The exciting thing about public art,” says MSU Department of Art and Art History Chair Tom Berding, “is it has to speak to a very plural and complex constituency, and has a lot of demands on it as such. It’s a huge challenge. When one makes as an artist, one thinks about whether it’s more of an intimate dialogue or you’re speaking with a more public voice.

“What’s striking about Anne Marie Karlsen’s work is her ability to bring strong color and formal relationships to imagery in ways that allow the work to carry from different distances visually, and also allow it to be read at different levels. It can be read as image but can also be read as architectural ornament, and color statements that are not just an add-on, but are integrated into the architectural setting. When you’re speaking in a public sphere, and you know that it’s going to be engaged by a lot of folks – a broad audience – I think one tends to look toward the power of form to carry a lot of the ideas.”

GREATEST ATTRACTION

Anne Marie says, “This wide visibility is the greatest attraction for me as a public artist. Being readily accessible and seen by thousands of people daily is, quite honestly, exciting. In a museum, my work is only accessible to the limited numbers of people who

visit it, and is probably viewed by even less. With public art, the numbers of people who see and can interact with my art is incredible.”

Not that Karlsen avoids museum display. Her artwork is in the permanent collections of 14 major museums from Kulturverwaltung Stadt Salzburg in Salzburg, Austria, the Brooklyn (NY) Museum, and Harvard’s Fogg Art Museum to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Museum of Art to name a few.

“Still, doing public art has so radically changed my life that it’s almost been like an entirely new career,” Karlsen says. “And, again, it was just one of those comments in a conversation – that could have passed by pretty easily. ‘Oh, yeah, that would be nice to do.’ For some reason – and I think it was because the art consultant was quite prominent – I decided to see it through. And I’ve been really lucky ever since.

“It’s just those few little moments that can have such a radical effect on your life. And you just have to decide if you’re going to jump on the horse and ride, or let it go by.”



*(Top) Los Angeles County Fire Department/
Woodland Hills Station, Woodland Hills, CA
"Ladders," 2009*

Karlsen says that there were times in her own life when she did vacillate about going for it or not. And the MTA station project, interestingly enough, was one of them.

"When I found out that I was a finalist for the station project, my son was four months old, and for me, it was quite overwhelming to have to go through this whole proposal process," Karlsen says. "I had to research all of this history, create the artwork, put the budget together, and find a fabricator – all at the same time that I had a newborn that was sleeping about three hours at a time.

"I remember sitting in our little townhouse and I would feed him and bathe him and put him down, and I'd have an hour or two to work. It would have been very easy for me to say, 'No,' because of my own personal circumstances. And, if I had said 'No,' I would have missed out on one of the biggest opportunities that I've ever had.

"In the end, the MTA station art project was a big break for me. Once I'd done something that large, it cemented my reputation, I think, within the public arts sphere. After that, I started working on other national projects and working in different materials like glass. I eventually got to the point where people were inviting me to bid on a project. I still apply for projects, but pretty often, I get invited."

She adds that the experience has taught her a great deal, not the least of which is that every once in awhile something resonates with the public,

and the press and the critics, and you just have to be ready for the attention when it comes.

Recently, a man on the street struck up a conversation with Karlsen and quickly drove home this point as she toured her ceramic tile wall installation, "Ogling," outside the Pavilions Market in West Hollywood with an MSU College of Arts and Letters staff member and Karlsen's 14-year-old son, Tor. Anne Marie was explaining that the artwork's design was inspired by Tor's arrangements and photographs of beauty salon hair rollers that he'd played with while waiting for his mom at the hair salon, when the man approached, eager to discuss the art.

"Pretty impressive, isn't it," he exclaimed, "I find something new in this artwork nearly every day. I come here for coffee and just sit and drink in the design, marvel at the colors and the sunlight and shadow playing off the tiles. You know, there are no two tiles alike? They are all different."

On being told that he was speaking to the piece's artist (Anne Marie confirmed that he was correct: no two tiles are alike), the man's eyes widened as he asked, "You're Anne Marie Karlsen?" and walked quickly over to the nearby bronze plaque with Karlsen's name on it, as if to verify his memory. "Oh, my, you don't know how much I enjoy your work!"

The two went on to discuss the color and design of the ceramics in depth for several minutes, as Anne Marie noted the installation's optical nature, and that it was actually a fast-track project, taking about two months to complete.

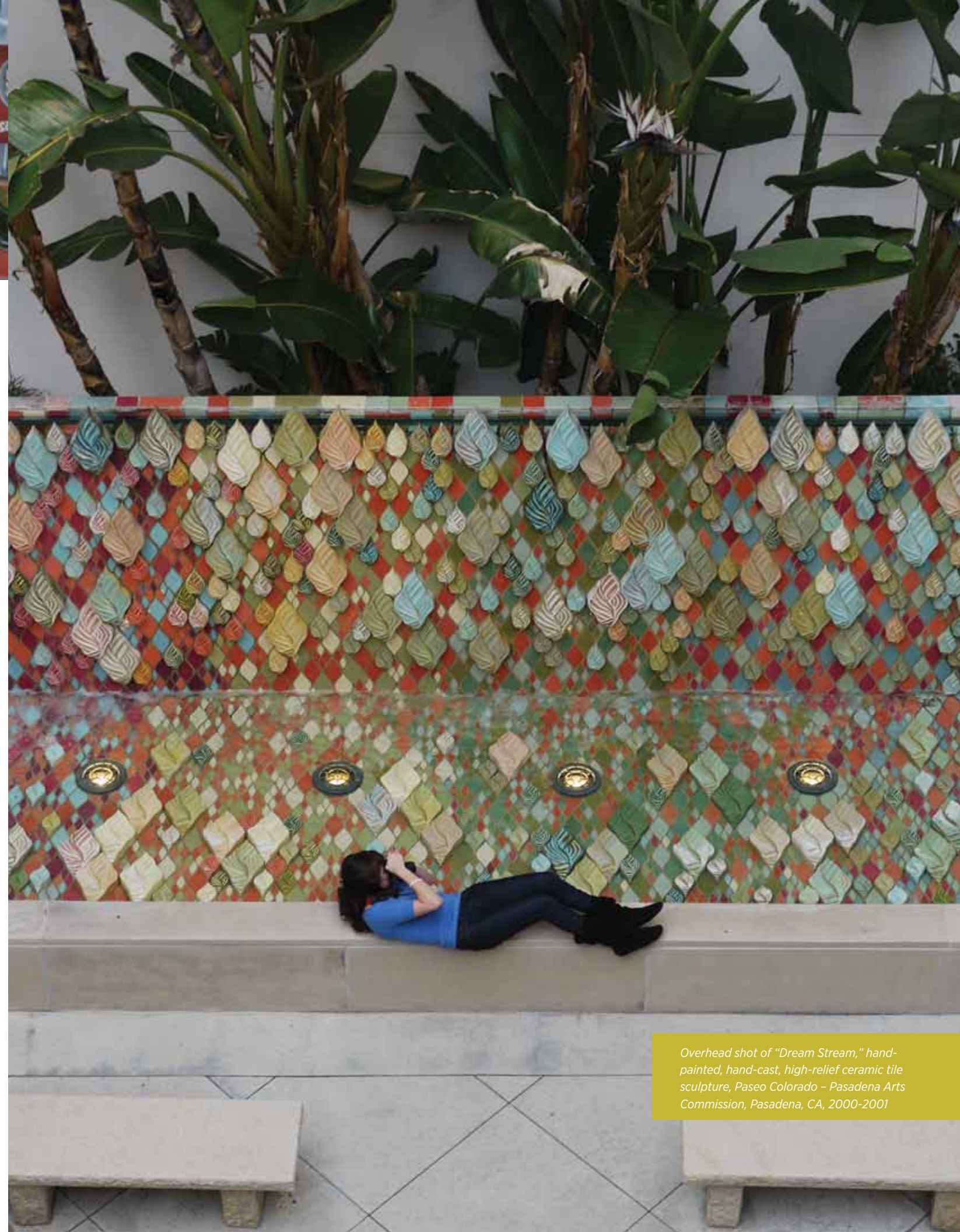
"It has a bit of a surrealist bent to it," she told him. "There are 13 different designs and they all look different from various angles. They are all handmade, and begin with the outlines of the image forms being silk-screened as a resist onto fired tile. Then, tiny bottles are used to squeeze the glaze in between all of the outlines."

"Not a dam?" the man asked.

"It works a little bit like a dam," Anne Marie responded, "but more as a resist. You have to squeeze the glaze into each of these little color areas."

Karlsen says that interacting with – and getting feedback from – people such as the man outside the market who "live" with her artwork on a daily basis, is one of the best rewards an artist can ever receive. "It's so pure, real, and visceral," she says. "It is always surprising and great fun. It makes all of the work I put into my art so much more worthwhile – beyond what I get out of the creative process or whatever the monetary commission might be."

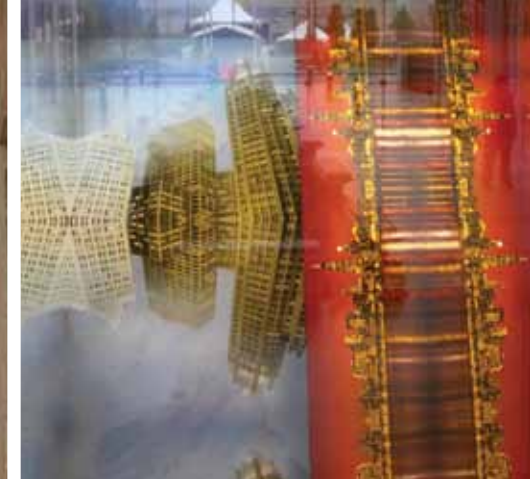
Berding notes, "Ceramicists are deeply attuned to the sense of the play of light to shadow, soft to hard, rough to smooth, and the different invocations of meaning that come through a heightened sensitivity to material as a carrier of meaning. And it's clear that Anne Marie has continued to draw and obviously expand upon her base knowledge. They are exemplary works demonstrating how one can take such



Overhead shot of "Dream Stream," hand-painted, hand-cast, high-relief ceramic tile sculpture, Paseo Colorado – Pasadena Arts Commission, Pasadena, CA, 2000-2001



“It was at MSU that I was introduced to conceptual art and earth art and things that were a little bit more edgy. It was really an interesting period, I think, to be there.”



knowledge and, as we say, make it your own. The same is true of the references to bas reliefs that are here, and the idea of the multiple. Repetition and rhythm are clearly a part of her artistic vocabulary and tools. They’re very rhythmic images; very compelling visually.”

SKILLS HONED AT MSU

Anne Marie says that while a great deal of work goes into each project, it is the creative process that she loves best. And that, she says, begins with research – and experimentation, two skills she began to hone as a student at MSU.

“When I was in high school in the late 1960s, we were like the kids in *‘American Graffiti,’*” Anne Marie says. “My school still required girls to wear skirts to school all the time, and boys had to have their hair cut above the ears and over their collars. This is 1968, ’69 and ’70, right? When the rest of the country was going hippy crazy, my high school was stuck in the 1950s!”

“When I got to MSU in 1970, there were still a handful of demonstrations going on, but the hippy activity was kind of petering out. Radicalism was over for all intents and purposes. And I always felt that the kids in my generation were the ones who were left with the aftermath. All of the radical change had been inspired, and we were left trying to figure out how to manage it.

THE 60s MENTALITY

“For me, personally, it was like going from 1950 to 1970 in a day. Even the Art Department was in a period of change and flux. I had a fairly

traditional art background and my thought at the time was to study commercial art through graphic design and illustration at MSU. But the Art Department had started to incorporate a lot of ’60s mentality.

“It was interesting, because while there was instruction in some of the more traditional art media, there was a lot of experimentation going on as well. It was at MSU that I was introduced to conceptual art and earth art and things that were a little bit more edgy. It was really an interesting period, I think, to be there.

“As I worked in etching and silk screening, graphic design and painting, my goals changed, and I wanted to be an exhibiting studio artist. I think this change was due to my exposure in both the Art Department and the Honors College to a wealth of ideas, experimental projects, and stimulating conversation. It was truly an interesting time period.”

Karlsen adds that her time at MSU was also critical in stoking her love of research and her desire to create and communicate meaning in her art. Many of her pieces incorporate historical information, drawings, painting and photographs of the local area to help provide information and context. For instance, *“Subdivisions,”* a 20-foot high by 15-foot wide floor-to-ceiling glass artwork that was designed by Karlsen and fabricated by Franz Mayer of Munich, Germany, is the focal point of the Lawndale (CA) Public Library’s glass corridor.

“I was initially inspired by the building and its reference to mid-century modern design, especially wall paper and tile patterns,” Anne Marie says. “I also drew inspiration from the painter Piet Mondrian and his geometric division of spaces into rhythmic squares and rectangles. The combination of these geometric patterns and grids reminded me of the maps of Lawndale I had seen in my research from the period when it was being subdivided for residential lots.”

INTRICATE RECONFIGURATIONS

Information regarding Karlsen’s Lawndale Library installation notes that the artwork is made up of eight repeated geometric patterned panels of cool blues, greens and yellows comprising intricate reconfigurations of historical photographs significant to the City of Lawndale. It adds that Karlsen worked closely with the Lawndale Historical Society to research the historic photographs used in the artwork.

“From a distance,” Anne Marie says, “the images become vibrant abstract patterns that reconfigure integral parts of the neighborhood history. The artwork acknowledges the past, yet envisions a new, bold design for the future. Up close, the images are readable like a history book.”

Top left to right: “Ogling,” Pavilions Market, West Hollywood Arts Commission, West Hollywood, CA, 2009; “Flyways,” Los Angeles Public Library / Playa Vista Branch, Playa del Rey, CA, 2009; “Points of View,” Federal Bureau of Investigation Headquarters, Chicago, IL, full installation (left) and wall images projected by sun (right), 2006.

Wherever possible, Karlsen tries to provide background and context for her art. When going through the approval process, she does presentations for the community and a variety of public arts organizations. She creates design boards illustrating the historical and photographic source material in the final artwork, and writes a conceptual statement explaining her ideas.

HIDDEN IMAGES

For the libraries, she provides a set of these materials to keep on-site, and often they are used as teaching materials. Because many of the historical source materials are “hidden images” in the overall art composition, the librarians give people this little book and ask questions like, ‘Can you find the photograph of the first high school in Lawndale?’ So, they can be interactive materials, too.

During daylight hours, light streams through the Lawndale Library’s multi-colored glass and projects green and blue coloring onto the carpet, furnishings and bookshelves. Similarly, dimensional shadows and images of the photographs and drawings in the glass panels play onto the library’s carpet and other surfaces. Karlsen says that in all of the library pieces she’s done – five to date – she has tried to put the glass pieces in positions where they can be seen in day or night so people can have slightly different experiences.

But she quickly adds that the key to realizing her vision is the sourcing and use of the highest quality materials. The Franz Mayer of Munich glass

“Initially, when I started working with glass – about 10 years ago – I was thinking about it like a painter; that I was applying color to a flat surface. I didn’t really think about transparency, or the capacity of glass to project colored light. Experimenting in the glass studio has increased my understanding of its vast possibilities, and my thinking has changed.”

studio in Germany that she uses for glass is one of only two worldwide that she knows of that utilizes its process. In fact, the same firm has a mosaic studio which Anne Marie also utilizes in her work. She recently created two exterior panels for Pasadena’s Raymond Theatre Renaissance project and was eager to showcase their intricate detail for College of Arts & Letters staff.

SHAPES ECHO INTERIOR

“The Mayer studio actually has quite a few Italian mosaic professionals on staff. As a result, these mosaic panels include precious and semi-precious stones in the design, a lot of onyx, Carrera marble and more. And the mosaic’s shapes echo ceiling designs and painted patterns inside the old theatre building.”

Karlsen adds that she is in the middle of a second major mosaic project for Royal Caribbean Cruise Line. She created a huge mosaic for a restaurant wall on The Oasis of the Seas, the world’s largest cruise ship that launched in May 2009. The company then asked her to create a mosaic for

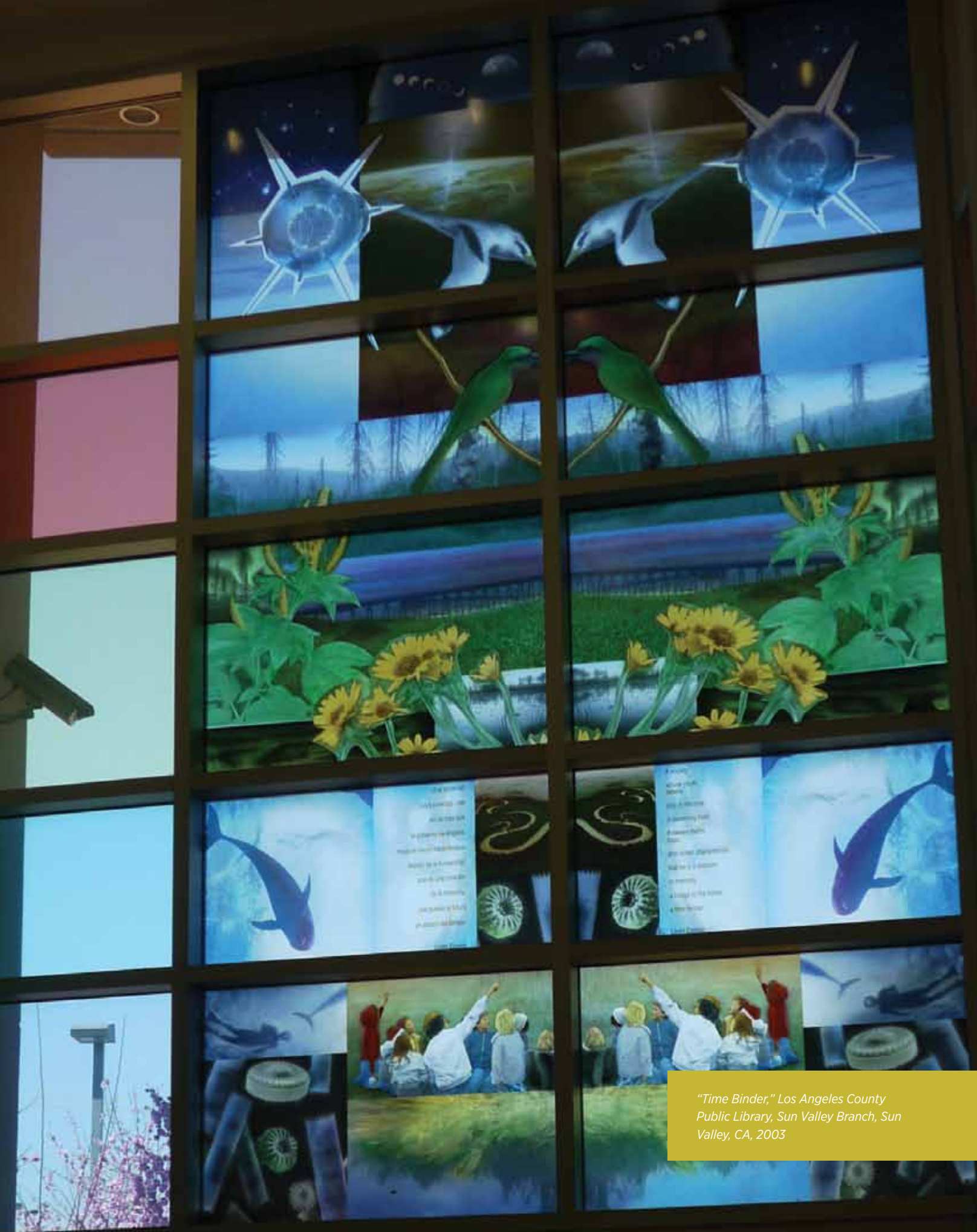
its sister ship, The Allure of the Seas – another of the world’s largest.

Still, glass is Karlsen’s favorite medium.

“With glass, one thing I’ve focused on is experimenting with different translations of the art image that incorporate light,” Karlsen says. “We do different kinds of colors, and try different glass techniques. It’s a true collaboration in a sense, because I have to – in effect – teach the studio artisans how to paint like me; or how to apply color like me; or how to think the way that I would think if I could do this, because I don’t have the technical expertise to do the piece on my own.”

Anne Marie says that most of the German craftsmen with whom she works are trained as artists in technical art schools with a specialization in glass. So they have an understanding of art as well as the chemistry of the glass, which is really quite an involved process.

“For example,” Karlsen says, “in color theory, if you take blue and you put yellow on top of it, you’ll get green.



"Time Binder," Los Angeles County Public Library, Sun Valley Branch, Sun Valley, CA, 2003

"Creating art that fits the space yet simultaneously expands meaning, thought and understanding," Karlsen says, "is a great feeling."



Well, that's not always the case in glass; colors react differently. So, these glass experts and artisans are the ones who understand the layering, and how many times you can fire something, and how to produce a desired effect.

"That's actually what I am most interested in doing now," says Karlsen. "Initially, when I started working with glass – about 10 years ago – I was thinking about it like a painter; that I was applying color to a flat surface. I didn't really think about transparency, or the capacity of glass to project colored light. Experimenting in the glass studio has increased my understanding of its vast possibilities, and my thinking has changed."

She adds that there are so many possibilities she wants to explore in both making glass, and utilizing it in layering, projecting shadow, light and reflections to create and communicate meaning. Karlsen's installation at the Chicago FBI Headquarters Building is perhaps the most ambitious project that she has tackled to date in this respect. She completed the one-half of 1% for the arts (of the total project's estimated construction cost) commission in 2006, but began working with the building's architects in 2005.

"In my work, I end up being a little bit like a general contractor, because I now often get involved when the buildings are just in the design phase," says Karlsen. "At least that's what I've been able to do more recently." She says that

wasn't usually the case in the '80s and '90s. Art was kind of an afterthought when the buildings were more or less completed, and it tended to get "plopped down" wherever there was available space.

"But now, more and more, they bring us in when there is time to change the plans to accommodate the artwork. So we can integrate it a lot more into the building. As a result, I end up working closely with the architects, the lighting designers, and the landscape architects – all in the pre-planning phase. That was critical with the FBI project for many reasons, not the least of which is that we had to beef up the wall so it would be strong enough to support the glass panels.

LOVE TO RESEARCH

"What was really interesting to me about the FBI project, though," says Karlsen, "is that I love to research information, and that's also what the FBI does. I work with snippets of collage images, and the FBI works with snippets of evidence."

Located in the main lobby entrance to the FBI building, the artwork comprises 15 5-foot-by-5-foot glass panels, floating 18 inches off the wall and cantilevered at an angle. Karlsen notes in her printed materials on the work: "Light is projected onto each panel which creates a complex array of reflected colored images under the cantilevered glass. From a distance, the design optically resolves into an overall abstract pattern which suggests natural forms and geometries. Only upon close observation will one discover that all of this abstract patterned information is, in fact, reconfigured photographic

images of the Chicago region. The experience of decoding the images reflects the FBI's mandate to create a cohesive analysis from a wide array of gathered information."

"The idea behind the project," Karlsen says, "was that the cast image was slightly distorted and was basically a trace of information, which is exactly how the FBI gathers information. It might be a trace of a fingerprint, or an image might have been smudged just a bit, and their job is to look at it and decipher what it is or means. So, I thought that what I was creating was a beautiful analogy to what they are doing."

Anne Marie notes that the FBI project was one of her most enjoyable experiences yet. Creating art that fits the space yet simultaneously expands meaning, thought and understanding, Karlsen says, is a great feeling.

"My hope for the future is that I will be able to use all of these ideas I have for structural glass pieces that cast multiple reflections on top of one another," Karlsen says. Laughing, she adds, "So, essentially, I'm waiting for that big-budget project to come along. Who knows? Maybe that's the next one."

And if it is, you can bet that Anne Marie is going to "jump on the horse and ride."

Detail of "Points of View," Federal Bureau of Investigation Headquarters, Chicago, IL, 2006

Top, column one: Anne Marie Karlsen

