

Yes, it is a cornfield.



Going down:  
POST's Habib  
Kheradyar in  
his elevator/  
installation site

PHOTO BY WAYNE SHIMAZU/ICORD



PHOTO BY TED SOQUI

# POST-Mortem, Popping Corn

Death and rebirth in downtown L.A.

BY DOUG HARVEY

It wasn't the likeliest time and place to open an art gallery. On a half-street tucked behind the downtown L.A. Greyhound Bus Station halfway into the '90s — after the '80s downtown revitalization had bottomed out and the current one was just a glimmer in Eli Broad's eye. LACE had recently abandoned its legendary digs a couple of blocks away because the crack-fueled street action was scaring off even the hardest art punks. Most of the small artist-run galleries that had recently given L.A. a distinctive art-world profile — your Food Houses and your Domestic Settings — were gone. But painter Habib Kheradyar already had a studio space there, and, having spent the previous year directing the art gallery at Cerritos College, he figured what the hell.

"It started out that I needed an excuse to be in my studio, so it seemed a very clever strategy to start a gallery," recalled Kheradyar during a recent visit. "And I needed a social life in relation to the art world — being a father kind of removed me a bit from being visible as an artist. So it was perfect. I thought we'd have one big party and I would play out my ideas about what curated shows should be like." Almost 10 years later Kheradyar's ideas still aren't played out, but the doors of POST — arguably the most innovative and independent L.A. gallery of the last decade — are finally closing. Ten years to the day that Kheradyar's first POST show — the modest but irreverent painting exhibit "Bumpy" — opened to unexpected kudos from the *Los Angeles Times*, *L.A. Reader*, *ArtWeek* and *Art Issues*, his last — a plethora of documentary materials aptly called "POST@POST" — will close with a bang. Or at least a party.

Kheradyar actually tried to close POST with a more literal bang three years ago, scheduling a rare L.A. appearance by Bay Area post-industrial mayhem artists Survival Research Laboratories as the final exclamation point. But when the smoke cleared and the fire marshals were sent home, Kheradyar was left with the feeling that there were still too many loose ends for a smooth closure. It was a good hunch, as the extra time allowed POST to host stellar solo shows by abstract painters like Linda Day and Sabina Ott, cultural exchanges with Korea and Norway, and a slew of the gallery's signature artist-curated group shows throwing together the famous and the unknown, the local and international, the cozily conventional with the off-the-scale what-the-fuck.

Kheradyar's hunches weren't always so bang on. While the first few years featured a remarkable stream of exciting emergencies (Ingrid Calame, Martin Durazo, Jason Rogenes, Charles LaBelle, Linda Besemer — not to mention a tragically underrated pair of shows by your humble scribe) and inspired moves like the rediscovery of influential Can-geleno Mowry Baden and the conversion of the building's freight elevator shaft into one of the hottest installation sites on the international art circuit, the late-'98 decision to convert the momentum and cultural currency into a second space — a mid-Wilshire showroom across the parking lot from the

6150 galleries — almost proved POST's undoing. "We thought it would be possible to have the experimental space but have a place that I referred to as 'the boutique' that would financially support both. But there was a lot we needed to learn. We hadn't played that other world yet. Downtown was safe — it was really more like an art project down here. Over there it was the world of commerce. And I didn't like it."

POST Wilshire managed to hold its own for more than a year, with strong shows of Brad Spence's textless airbrushed textbook cover paintings, Tina Marrin's quirky hooked rugs and dissected posters, Phil Argent's faux-digital über-Vegas eye candy, and so on right up unto the critical and popular slam dunk of the last show at the commercial outpost — Megan McManus' meticulously glazed aerial crotch shots. By the time POST Wilshire folded, though, Kheradyar was deep in debt and had to give up the very studio that had been the excuse for starting a gallery in the first place. POST Downtown cut back its hours, and looked like it might dwindle away. Instead, it rallied. As if to prove the validity of its original experimental mandate, POST returned to the programming strategies that had put it on the map. Kheradyar got his studio back, and began committing more energy to his art practice in lieu of gallery sitting. But POST's end was only a matter of time, and timing. "One of my favorite Jenny Holzer Truisms says something like 'Timing is a sign of genius.' I think that was the genius of POST," observes the artist-turned-gallerist-turned-artist. "I really designed it to fail as a commercial gallery. It was fucking glorious, but at some point it got the better of me."

Those who would take POST's closure as a sign of the end of the downtown art scene need only cruise north just past Chinatown to encounter a most literal embodiment of the neighborhood's perennial rebirth. Lauren Bon's *Not a Cornfield* is an idiosyncratic bit of land art that blends together a strikingly surreal visual presence — 32 acres of luminous green cornstalks in the heart of the city — with a complex web of social, political and cultural negotiations. This includes the agitated response of activists who see the temporary allocation of the already controversial "Cornfield" state park site as a

perpetuation of the imperialist disenfranchisement of local ethnic communities. In fact, the site-specific installation was intended from the beginning to act as a locus for community involvement, and has been drawing the public in with a variety of regular film screenings, musical and dance performances, historical presentations, and art and literary salons.

Much of the controversy derives from the timing. Because the entire project is funded by the Annenberg Foundation (of which Bon is a trustee), it didn't have to navigate very much bureaucracy to get official approval. You want to use corn to leach toxins out of the old soil, install a permanent sprinkler system and five acres of green turf, create a temporary tourist attraction, and pay for it all yourself? Hmmm . . . okay! On top of this, the plan had to coincide with the growing season, so there wasn't time for a lot of deliberation. And it seems to have lit a fire under the Department of Rec and Parks' ass, as the Cornfield park, which was sounding like a \$60 million renovation set for the distant future, has been revised to a plan for a low-budget "interim park" to be up and running by spring. Bon's land art isn't without precedent — from the peculiar fad of "agritainment" maize mazes started by Disney World alumnus Don Fritz and designer Adrian Fisher to environmental activist art like Dominique Mazeaud's *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande River*. But it's the unique hybrid of these and several other strains (including the Friday-night film screenings and Sunday-afternoon drum circles and the attention being generated regarding the history and political issues surrounding the use of this land) that make it a distinctive work of art. That and the fact that from the north end around sunset, facing the downtown L.A. skyline, you get the feeling that Kansas and the Emerald City might be the same thing after all. ■

POST@POST | POST, 1904 E. Seventh Pl. | Closing reception, Saturday, September 10, 7-10 p.m. | (213) 488-3379

NOT A CORNFIELD | 1201 N. Spring St. | Thurs.-Sun., 6 a.m.-8 p.m. | Through November 2 | (323) 226-1158 or [www.notacornfield.info](http://www.notacornfield.info)