

abode Artisan

Sculpture Beckons the Curious to Mesopotamian-inspired Labyrinth

BY MIRIAM SILVER

For more than a year, a grassy and furrowed labyrinth lay somewhat secretively at the side of the Museum of Contemporary Art at the Luther Burbank Center. Hundreds of people drove by the spiritual area now known as the North Sculpture Gallery. Some even walked. But few apparently noticed the painstaking work, the meandering, geometric paths designed by Mendocino County labyrinth maker Alex Champion and Sonoma Academy students.

Now, Penny Michel's three-part ceramic sculpture—two tall, earth-colored vertical columns, random balls on the ground and muted, cascading spheres that paradoxically reach skyward—draws in the passing crowd, making them participants in the landscape.

"When I first saw this site, I wanted to bring attention to the area, so I built gates, which are

hung so that you go through. It invites people to go into the labyrinth," said Michel.

For the site, called the Meander Wand Labyrinth, Michel called on her interest in the ancient, a synchronistic touch.

"My world has always been about the past, a look from another era. I've always been drawn to Mesopotamian art forms and prehistoric art," said Michel, who calls the work "Convolution"—the act of rolling or winding together.

Santa Rosa artist Michel was born in Carthage in North Africa. After moving to America, she returned to visit her grandparents

who were constantly remodeling their homes, often unearthing ancient things that caught their granddaughter's eye.

Michel's sculpted ceramic gates and skyward

spheres achieve their of-another-time look from the hieroglyphic lettering that runs around the circumference of the spheres and down the twin, reddish gates. The 26 symbols—created from rubber blocks

and wrapped around her work—are Michel's own design, with each nevertheless corresponding to a letter in the English alphabet. Inside Michel has written messages.

One says Mesopotamia. Others have the

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names of her sons. Some express Michel's outrage, for instance, over the destruction of ancient Iraqi museums.

In part because Michel works primarily in clay and the labyrinth was carved from the earth, museum director Gay Dawson invited Michel to create the first piece for the area.

"The ideas she was exploring in her art played nicely on some of the underlying aesthetic currents of the labyrinth: form as a healing force, wisdom that is hidden in code," said Dawson. "There is a nice tie-in with materials as well."

Lately Michel has turned to other large works and recently completed an exhibit called "The Tribe"—10, eight-foot-tall male and female figures that hovered over Paradise Ridge Winery and now line the wooded perimeter of her property.

While her work is fired, stained and glazed several times, the sculptures appear as traces, hints of the past.

"I don't want this to look brand new. I want this to look like someone dug this out from somewhere."

A plaque invites visitors to walk the labyrinth, meditate, dance or chant. To visitors, it instructs: "May the Path Give you Peace." ■

Convolution will be on view in the North Sculpture Gallery at the Museum of Contemporary Art through summer of 2005. Penny Michel's work can also be seen at the New Leaf Gallery in Berkeley and with Virginia Brier in San Francisco.

For information on the Museum of Contemporary Art: 707.527.0797

