

The

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THE MEMBERSHIP GUIDE OF THE NATURAL HISTORY FAMILY OF MUSEUMS

CONVERSATIONS

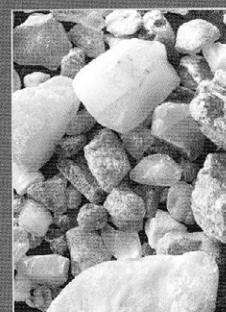
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CONVERSATIONS

Artists Meet Scientists and Inspire a New Exhibition

Science has informed art—and in some cases, the opposite has occurred—for centuries. Beyond ultra-realistic murals depicting past and present life on earth, one does not expect to see exceptional contemporary art exhibited at, much less inspired by, a natural history museum.

Until now, that is.

On Friday and Saturday, February 18 and 19, members can preview the Natural History Museum's worldwide debut of *Conversations*, featuring original works of art by six accomplished Los Angeles-area artists—works inspired by actual artifacts in the Museum's own collection.

TWO LANGUAGES, ONE CONVERSATION

The exhibit opens a new door into the artistic and the scientific mind. The artists—Kim Abeles, Lita Albuquerque, Tony Berlant, Paul McCarthy, Ed Moses and John Valadez—are paired with scientists from the Museum's Research and Collections department. This juxtaposition of the languages of art and science will help to inform the resulting "conversations" that ultimately take shape as newly created works of art. *Conversations* also promises to offer fresh perspectives on the Museum's 33-million-specimen collection that allow Museum visitors to make insightful connections to our past, present and future.

"This conversation, involving artists, scientists and objects in our collections, enables us and our visitors to see and appreciate the riches of our Museum in new ways," says Vanda Vitali, the Museum's Vice President of Public Programs.

SYNERGY OF ART AND SCIENCE

Conversations has spurred a number of literal conversations between Margaret Hardin, the Museum's coordinating curator, and Patrick Ela, guest curator for the *Conversations* exhibition.

"In a very real sense, the artists are holding visual conversations with the objects they select from the Museum's extraordinary collections," says Hardin. "The works of art they are creating for the exhibition are their responses to these conversations."

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"There is certainly a synergy created when the artists and scientists work together in this way," Ela responds. "Artists and scientists have much in common— probably more similarities than one may think. Both pursuits require creativity. Both don't just keep doing things the same old way, but are constantly looking for new relationships, new insights, new meaning."

Hardin agrees. "The real commonality is that both fields employ processes of discovery. It is just that the discoveries are made through different lenses."

THE COLLECTIONS AS CREATIVE INSPIRATION

Over several weeks, the artists were given access to the Museum's vaults and storerooms and invited to choose objects that will serve as the basis for creating their works of art (see photos at right). Not an easy task, given the extraordinary size and scope of the Museum's treasures.

As of this writing, it is not yet known exactly which Museum artifacts each artist has selected, or how the curators' vision of the collections will be transformed by the artists' works. From the tiniest insect to a giant dinosaur skeleton, or from a Pre-Columbian serving bowl to an exquisite gem or a fantastically odd creature from the ocean depths, the choices are virtually endless.

"Our collections contain an amazing range of scientific specimens and man-made objects," says Hardin. "We value the collections in our care as the basis for our research and educational programs. We approach them as sources of information that enable us to better understand the history of life and the record of human accomplishment on this planet."

"500 YEARS OF EXHIBITIONS"

Conversations gives this process a unique dimension by approaching the collections as sources for creative inspiration.

"The public may not realize what a huge resource the Museum is," says Ela. "It would take 500 years of exhibitions to present all that is currently in storage." Public perception, he says, is sure to change when visitors view the *Conversations* exhibition. "From conservation to scientific discovery, this creative process will shed light on the tremendous work done by this institution."

Each artist will have a space within the exhibition to present their art, which is based on the objects selected from the Museum's vast collections. Sound design created by Phyllis Ginter, along with lighting, projections and text will provide added context and texture to the exhibit. Self-Help Graphics, a visual arts center that presents Latino/Chicano art and local artists, will publish a limited-edition suite of silk screens by the exhibition artists that complement the exhibit. The silk screens will also be on display at the Museum.

Meanwhile, the creative process is in full swing, along with the conversations that inform it. The results are sure to be fascinating and thought-provoking. Hardin and Ela hope Museum visitors will come away from *Conversations* as inspired as those who have come together to create it.

"In the course of our work," says Hardin, "we curators may pause to appreciate the beauty of an ancient ceramic vessel or the elegant functionality of a bat, but we rarely share these experiences. *Conversations* offers us an unparalleled opportunity to communicate this sense of discovery and excitement to others."

"This is not the normal natural history museum exhibition," states Ela. "Our guests will find humor and possibly some irony in the artwork that is developed. The ultimate hope is that *Conversations* encourages all of us to realize our full potential and to find the commonalities that can lead to mutual respect."