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Thinking Grande and In Plain Sight: Public Art in Santa Barbara

Tuesday, January 29, 2008

By [Charles Donelan](#)

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This provocative double bill of Santa Barbara documentaries paired the just-finished **Thinking Grande**, which examines the [Bonilla Ranch](#), a believe-it-or-not Mexican Disneyland in Cuyama, with another brand new film, **In Plain Sight**, which tells the story of Santa Barbara's longtime involvement with public art. *Thinking Grande* was mostly shot on location in Santa Barbara County's own Cuyama and Fresno, Mexico, while **In Plain Sight** illuminates some of the most familiar intersections and attractions in downtown Santa Barbara. Despite these differences in location, the films have something profound in common, which is an **appreciation for the idiosyncratic and idealistic aesthetic roots of our community**. For anyone interested in the cultural origins and tendencies of our region, they are both must-sees.

FILM:

In Plain Sight: Public Art in Santa Barbara

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Jose Luis Bonilla has lived a classic American immigrant dream story. Invited by a friend's father to join them in

Glendale, Bonilla left his native Mexico as a teenager with nothing more than the clothes on his back and a willingness to work. His rise through the ranks at a series of Glendale supermarkets led to a career building and managing a chain of Mexican-style grocery stores throughout the southwest. Nostalgic for the days and folkways of his youth in [Fresnillo](#), [Zacatecas](#), Bonilla bought land in the remote North County community of Cuyama where he discovered all he needed to become a truly "grande" landscape and architectural designer — lots of rocks. Surrounded by his beloved "relaxing" rocks and highly-skilled Mexican metal and stone workers, Bonilla set about constructing his fantasy of **an old-time Mexican town**, complete with a 3,000-seat rodeo and bull-fighting arena.

Why haven't you heard about the fabulous Casa Bonilla? That's where the film comes in, but not before the County. Bonilla built his extraordinary and beautiful private kingdom without receiving — or even applying for — any building permits. **The location was so remote that the County simply did not find out about it until after much of it was finished and it had been used for rodeos and concerts several times.** Once they did, the Bonilla family was enjoined from organizing any other large public festivals there until the legality of the construction was no longer under dispute.

Somewhere in the middle of all this, Bonilla walked out on the whole project and moved back to Fresnillo. His children still live in Cuyama, and all members of the Bonilla family are taking an active interest in using the place again, but Jose Luis, the patriarch and imaginer of the place, is not expected back anytime soon.

While the approximately hour-long film contains some repetitive footage of the handful of live events that Bonilla's arena hosted before it was shut down, the impact is if anything heightened by the way the images emphasize the dream-like transience of Bonilla's achievement. **Today, the grounds are graceful and abandoned — a giant stone ghost-town that's lost little of its original grandeur or polish.** There's a Mexican-style gazebo constructed entirely from ornate metalwork that is truly dazzling, and when the film cuts from this empty pavilion to the one it is based on in Fresnillo to show Bonilla sitting there, talking about maybe coming back, it creates great pathos on the part of its inspiration. Former County Arts Commissioner and all-around arts czar **Patrick Davis**, who co-produced the film, speaks on the record of his hope that someday it will become a regional arts center—a place where people can go to learn about the indigenous arts of Old Mexico without leaving California. As far as the County is concerned, Bonilla has done nothing wrong, and the town's future, while indeterminate, nevertheless looks bright.

Learning about this fabulous miniature Mexico made for a great lead-in to the film which showed next, *In Plain Sight*, a documentary by **Christy Zwicke and Tony Ruggieri** that was created to accompany a cultural tour of Santa Barbara's public works of art. As anyone who has followed the Santa Barbara art scene in the 21st century will know, this is a controversial subject, and, while still making something to last for the ages, the directors did not shy away from presenting strong opinions on all sides of the issue.

Public art in Santa Barbara dates from at least the Chumash days, and the film rightly begins with **the famous Painted Caves**. From there we are taken on a truly kaleidoscopic tour that travels through the pioneering work of **Pearl Chase** and **Channing Peake** to the contemporary sculpture of **Marge Dunlap, Ed Inks, Aristides Demetrios, and Donald Davis**. Along the way we hear some amazing stories about preservation, approval processes, and the strange and often contradictory ideas that public art tends to arouse in people.

Surprisingly, the town's most controversial public sculpture is not the infamous dinosaur poop that once dotted State Street, but rather Herbert Bayer's [Chromatic Gate](#). To many, including respected artist **Hank Pitcher**, the Gate represents an inappropriate use of public funds and constitutes an aesthetic failure. To others, like current executive director of the county arts commission **Ginny Brush**, it is a point of pride and a definite value that public art provokes discussion and even debate. To Brush, Patrick Davis, Ed Inks, and several other of the eloquent speakers brought in to present this view, public art is about getting thinking people into the streets, and getting them to do some of their thinking there.

If what's in *In Plain Sight* is any indication, that mission has been accomplished.

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