

CALENDAR

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ART REVIEWS

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Good Environment: "California Wash: A Memorial," by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, is an exemplary site-specific public art project. Located in Santa Monica, where Pico Boulevard meets the ocean, this lush, sycamore-lined incline encompasses an entire city block. At the top of the block is an extended walkway, enlivened with swirls of shale and bits of colored glass. This leads to an expanse of beachfront promenade—adjacent to Shutters on the Beach Hotel—that is decorated with indigenous flora and bas-relief fauna. Finally, there is a new bridge over the existing drainage outfall, whose contours echo the breaking waves just beyond.

Though massive in scale, the whole is refreshingly modest in effect. Understatement, however, is just one of the things that makes "California Wash" more interesting than the usual "nature good, people bad" eco-art. What really sets it apart is that despite their long-standing commitment to the natural environment, the Harrisons are not averse to culture.

Indeed, they work in the spirit of landscape architecture, creating an artwork-cum-environment that is frankly aestheticized.

The design reflects the formal structure of the wash ecologies that once existed from Mandeville Canyon to the beach. It is dominated by expanses of rock and stone that mimic geological striations. These cross-sectional views segue into patterns that resemble topographic maps, and then into grid-like tracery that conjures the city still in the process of subsuming everything in its way.

With the most visually seductive access ramp I've ever seen, the site becomes an occasion to ponder not only Southern California's prehistory, but also the practical and ethical demands of the modern urban environment. Here, art provides two things that for once don't seem contradictory: a respite and an excuse to ask questions.

■ "California Wash: A Memorial," where Pico Boulevard meets the Pacific Ocean, Santa Monica, (310) 823-3400.