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New Art Exhibit Channels ‘Melrose Place’



A new exhibit featuring artifacts and props from the 1990s TV series ‘Melrose Place’ opens Friday at Red Bull Studios in New York City. *PHOTO: ANDREW LAMBERSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Mel Chin’s conceptual-art project “In the Name of the Place” draws inspiration from an unlikely subject: the 1990s soap opera “Melrose Place.”

At Red Bull Studios in Chelsea, sets from the television show, a spinoff of “Beverly Hills, 90210,” have been rebuilt for an exhibition opening Friday. On display are dozens of artworks that doubled as episode props, many with coded messages.

Mr. Chin got the idea after chancing upon the show in its heyday and finding a set designer willing to smuggle his creations into scenes. It was a smart move, said Frank South, a “Melrose Place” writer and producer at the time. “The way to do it was not to tell anybody.”

The secret works included a quilt patterned with the chemical composition of RU-486, the morning-after pill, that kept a pregnant character warm in one scene, as well as Chinese-takeout bags with political messages stamped on them in a language lost to many U.S. viewers of prime-time TV.



Mel Chin, center, got the idea for the exhibit after chancing upon ‘Melrose Place’ in the 1990s. *PHOTO: ANDREW LAMBERSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Around 200 pieces of the sort were created by the GALA Committee, a collaborative effort led by Mr. Chin that included art students from the University of Georgia and the California Institute of the Arts.

Eventually, Mr. South said, “Melrose Place” writers and cast members got in on the action. The exhibit features some of their correspondence with the artists, including a fax that shows a drawing of a postal worker whose mailbag bears a machine-gun clip.

“The piece is in reference to the rash of job-related violence committed by postal employees over the past decade,” the fax reads.

Rob Estes, an actor on “Melrose Place,” said his favorite pieces include a set of bed sheets with a graphic-design motif based on unrolled condoms and an elaborate scene in which his character visited a museum that was showing works by the GALA Committee.



The exterior of Red Bull Studios on West 18th Street has been

Assistants move set pieces for the show. PHOTO: ANDREW LAMBERSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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refashioned with some “Melrose Place” touches, including the decorative tile from the apartment complex where most of the main characters’ lives, fights and trysts played out. Visitors will have a chance to wander through re-created rooms and settings from the show, including a Shooters bar whose bottles feature fake labels commenting on the history of alcohol in the U.S., and a swimming pool that has been refashioned as a conversation pit filled with plush blue chairs.

“You enter through a fantasy,” Mr. Chin said, “and come into this art show about reality that was conducted in another fantasy.”

Mr. South said his bosses at the show, when they found out, were initially concerned but then intrigued.

When he told the late “Melrose Place” executive producer Aaron Spelling, “I went up and explained it was supposed to be subtextual and unconscious,” Mr. South recalled. “He said, ‘Well, did it cost us anything?’ I said it was all this set decorating we got for free.”