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## Datebook

### Urban forest as art gallery Site-specific art installations at Presidio

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The starting point for “Presidio Habitats” at Fort Winfield Scott is easy to spot, provided that you can find your way up to Fort Scott to begin with.

Across from the Log Cabin and behind the brig is a 16-foot banner strung between towers. “START,” it reads in bold stitched-on letters. The finish line, across from the Immigrant Point Lookout about a mile away, is marked “FINISH” in similar fashion.

The grassland and urban forest between the start and finish is scattered with 10 installations in what amounts to the first-ever site-specific art exhibition in a national park. The show, which took two years to plan and nearly \$1 million to construct, is free, a gift from the For-Site Foundation, a San Francisco nonprofit dedicated to the making and understanding of art about place.

The place is being provided by the Presidio Trust. The art is provided by an international field of sculptors, ceramicists, architects and industrial designers.

It is worth getting lost or detouring just to see the Exhibition Pavilion - which is inside three reclaimed shipping containers connected at odd angles like trailer homes after a tornado. Here people can get warm, get a map, watch video interviews and get directions for a cell phone tour.

Most of the artwork is along trails and among the tall grass and dense cypress, down in the hollows and up in the trees. Each piece represents the artist’s response to the preferences of an “animal client” that either lives in the Presidio or did.

Nathan Lynch, for example, chose to lobby for the black-tailed jackrabbit, extirpated in these parts. “Where Is the Hare” is a plea from a tortoise waiting at the starting line for the fabled race against a rabbit. “It’s an invitation to return. I’m appealing to the ego of the hare,” explains Lynch, while finalizing his gates of wood and steel in a Mission District shop with saws buzzing. “I’m making a habitat for an animal that is gone and trying to lure it back.”

“Sculpture Habitat for the Gray Fox” by Cebra, an architectural firm in Denmark, is a pyramid-shaped den of recycled fence posts. The word “fox” is spelled out on the den’s door. “Western Screech Owl Habitats” by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei consists of porcelain nests painted in blue and



white Ming dynasty style, hanging in trees by the general’s home.

This is the first exhibition to be presented by For-Site, which is best known for having the foresight to commission Andy Goldsworthy to put a pencil-point spire along the Bay Area Ridge Trail near the Arguello Gate. This show is an elaborate extension of that one, except that the pieces are temporary. Whatever is left after one year, to the day, in the fog and wind and rain will be disassembled.

The show was organized by gallery owner and For-Site founder Cheryl Haines. Asked what she was thinking, during a drive-through, she laughs and repeats the question “What was I thinking?” as if there were no logical answer. Then she tries again.

“It’s such a remarkable place, with many layers of both natural and social history,” she says. “It is an underutilized part of our city, and I’ve always been fascinated with all the different conversations that have occurred here.”

Many fascinating conversations have involved the artists and curators on one side and the Presidio Trust on the other. One of these happened during installation of the “FINISH” gate for Lynch’s

piece. He had chosen a spot next to Washington Boulevard, and the installation team hired by For-Site was preparing the ground when a representative of the Presidio Trust came by and ordered work stopped because it was too close to the roadway.

When Haines quietly happened by in her Prius, there were seven workers sitting there awaiting conflict resolution. The finish line was moved away from the road so as not to distract motorists and bicyclists who might think there was a road race they were missing.

The only one of the 10 pieces that is overtly human-centric is “Patience” by Jensen Architects. It consists of a series of metal chairs scattered around a field of weeds. People are invited to sit and watch for two great blue herons that live here.

These yellow chairs are art. The little white flags in the dirt are not. They signal native plants that are part of the Presidio habitat, but not part of “Presidio Habitats.”

“I’m sure that will be the most asked question of the entire experience,” Haines says.

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