



Art Notes: German artist Bettina Pousttchi brings to Dallas her rare spin on history



G.J. McCarthy/Staff Photographer

Artist Bettina Pousttchi, photographed Wednesday, April 9, 2014 at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. Pousttchi's installation "Drive Thru Museum" opens at the museum on April 12.



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Bettina Pousttchi grew up in Germany in a town called Mainz, which was once part of the Holy Roman Empire. Her father hails from Iran. Just as her lineage is a mixture of German and Persian, her art is influenced by photography, sculpture and architecture, the trio of elements she brings to her new show at the Nasher Sculpture Center.

“My goal is to work at the intersection of sculpture, architecture and photography,” she says, and so she has in creating a show that simulates a drive-through museum at the Nasher, whose site once belonged to car dealerships and repair shops during the seedier era that preceded the Arts District.

“I wanted to change the spatial experience of the collection,” she says. The collection “is absolutely outstanding, one fantastic piece next to the other.” She revels in the fact that it’s a “rare, ground-floor museum” offering visitors a close-up view of the street. “You can see Auguste Rodin’s *The Age of Bronze* and beyond it you see cars passing. That’s unique.”

She loves the Arts District, going so far as to say she wishes they had something like it in her adopted city, Berlin. “It’s wonderful, it’s ambitious, it’s great. I wish we could have any one of these buildings in Berlin.”

The architecture in Berlin, forever changed by World War II and the collapse of the Berlin Wall in the late 1980s, “is extremely mixed. There are many, many, many layers of history interfering. It’s impossible to live in Berlin and not be aware of its history.”

Which is why, as an artist, she began to delve more deeply into “how history continues to influence our present” — even in places such as Dallas. She brings that perspective to the Arts District, where she marvels at the array of buildings designed by Pritzker Award-winning architects. The Nasher, for example, designed by Renzo Piano, has suddenly become one of her favorite buildings in the world.

Even so, it made her all the more curious to burrow into the history of the district, to find out what existed on its pavement years ago. History is perhaps the fiercest component in her work, whether it’s found in Berlin or Dallas. Her show at the Nasher, “Drive Thru Museum,” is her first U.S. solo exhibition and part of the Nasher’s Sightings series.

“I find it’s always important,” she says, “to have an awareness of the past.”

And when it comes to the Arts District, history, she says, is shaped dramatically by the car. That fueled her desire even more to create the drive-through effect.

The pattern on the Flora Street windows and those leading to the terrace is a photograph she took resembling scissor gates, such as the kind that used to appear on Ross Avenue businesses.

“We didn’t want to use real cars,” she says. “After all, it’s not Disney World.”

And yet she managed to transform one of the Nasher's upstairs galleries into a closed urban streetscape that brings back to mind the bygone era when Ross Avenue was known as "Automobile Row," full of filling stations, parking lots and used-car dealerships.

She has painted the floor of the gallery to resemble a street, creating a drive-through look, and she applied sculptures made from police barricades and street bollards to fill in select spaces.

Pousttchi's work deals often with the "constructed nature and tenuousness" of memory.

In recent projects, such as *Echo (2009 to 2010)* in Berlin and *Framework (2011)* in Frankfurt, she unveiled photographs at the scale of architecture, creating a presence not unlike the kind found in large-scale sculpture.

"I don't build architecture. I react to it," she says. "And, for me, it means everything to have an awareness of the past."