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Artists engage in 'Patriot Acts'

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ON a recent Monday afternoon, Linda Pollack was sitting on a spiral-shaped, bright red couch in an otherwise empty room that she has dubbed "the Habeas Lounge." Despite its comfy environs (think plenty of pillows and a pot of tea brewing in the corner), the lounge has quite a lofty purpose: to facilitate democratic dialogue.

And facilitate it has. Named for the legal concept of habeas corpus (a protection against unlawful imprisonment), the lounge is part of "Patriot Acts," a politically minded group show curated by Pollack at the 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica. In past months, the space has hosted conversations with a Burmese monk, a Loyola Law School professor and the League of Women Voters. Coming events include a Monday symposium on the presidential candidate selection process and a discussion titled "How to Improve the World (You'll Only Make Matters Worse)" on Feb. 3.

"Patriot Acts" is the first in a yearlong series of exhibits and happenings titled "The Future of Nations," which explores big-picture issues, such as the Constitution, demographics, urban environments and war. (Zeal Harris' mixed-media canvas, for example, deals with the complex issues enveloping an Iraq vet.)

"It has a lot to do with our feeling that this is an incredibly important election and, without being partisan about it, we really wanted to give artists a platform," says artistic director Clayton Campbell.

Housed in a single-story building not far from the Habeas Lounge, the rest of "Patriot Acts" occupies a white-walled gallery space that, fittingly, will transform into a polling place during the Feb. 5 presidential primary election.

But for now the gallery is filled with less literal manifestations of the Constitution. There is Hillary Mushkin's vinyl wallpaper, which incorporates images of junk food and military vehicles into a camouflage-like pattern in shades of pink, brown and olive; and Vincent Johnson's "The Ballot of History" an installation that juxtaposes

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...and their partners. The artist's history, an installation that juxtaposes photos of historic voting machines with a brand-new Pollmaster II voting booth (which, incidentally, folds up into a briefcase).

"I felt like my role as the curator was to create a space for the artists to explore different constitutional ideas that struck their fancy," Pollack says. "Whenever you mention an art show and the Constitution, most people only think of aesthetic concerns around the First Amendment and freedom of expression, and there was a much more complex treatment with these artists."

Like Pollack's lounge, Pam Strugar and Shirley Tse's "AWOL AWOL" deals with the concept of habeas corpus, albeit in a much different way. The mixed-media installation plays on the meaning of the military term by printing it on a movable wall. "We really liked the idea of the false wall, because it challenges the preconceived idea of the stability of the system," Strugar says.

"In reality, every time there is a change of power, the law is open to interpretation," Tse adds.

'PATRIOT ACTS'

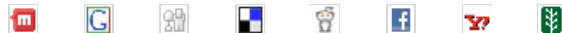
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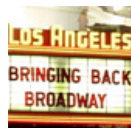
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