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The soft hum of electricity emanates from every wall in Lili Lakich's studio as bright neon lights glow and flicker from dozens of works of art on the walls.

Lakich is a neon artist. Neon has been her artistic medium of choice for about 30 years. And to support her passion and promote neon's use in fine arts, she helped found the Museum of Neon Art in 1981.

"There was no place to exhibit neon," Lakich says, "the medium was dying."

She says plastic signs, which are cheaper and less labor-intensive, began to replace neon signs in the 1950s and '60s, making it difficult to obtain materials and to generate interest for her artwork.

in any other way than for signs.

"It's art the public loves because it draws them in," Lakich says. "They know neon from what they see on the street, so it draws them in and it becomes so different."

"People identify neon as a sign," adds Michael Flechtner, one of the artists in the exhibition. "But there's a difference between signs and fine art. It's a matter of getting people educated."

The opening exhibition, "Electric Muse," will feature 60 works by 25 artists, including six pieces by Lakich, who is now a member of the board of trustees of the museum on a volunteer basis. Her work consists of clean lines and breathtaking combinations of neon

Flechtner. He says those who do it well can make it look easy, but it takes years of practice to get that good.

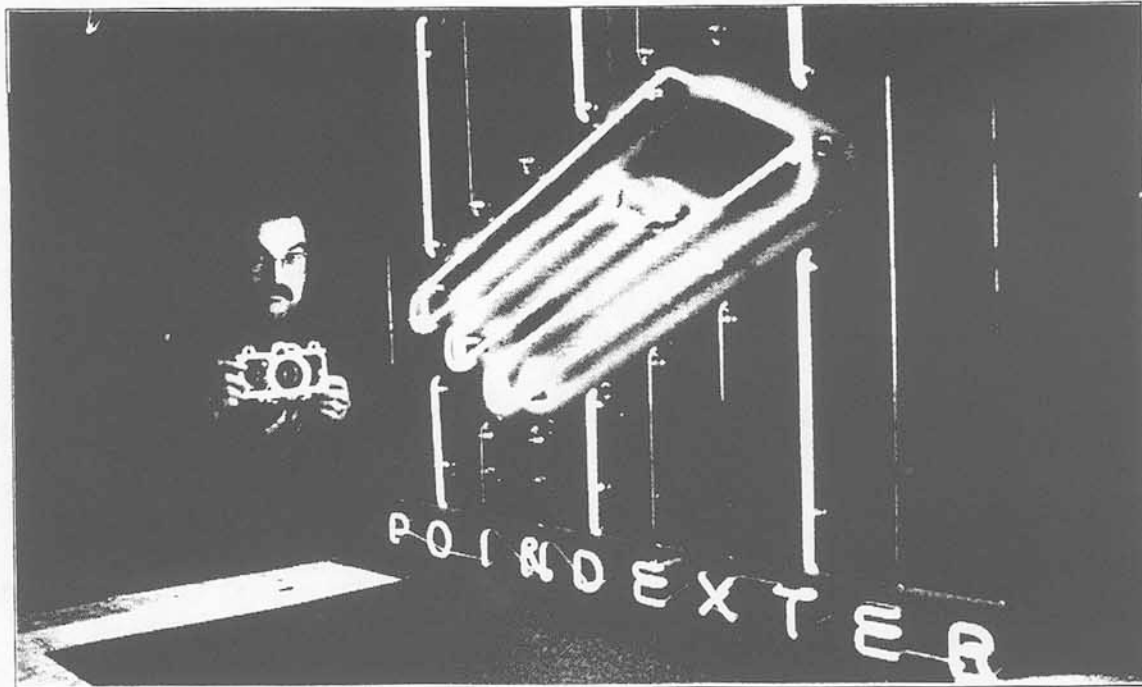
And it can be dangerous, as it consists of taking glass tubing and heating it up to melt it just enough to make it flexible.

"Most burning on yourself happens in the first six weeks," he says. "And every once in a while you get a reminder burn."

The differences in the artistic styles of these artists are a testament to the versatility of neon.

"It's amazing, the artists are very different from each other," says Lakich. "It's a medium, not a movement

TURNING THE LIGHTS BACK



MONA

The Museum of Neon Art returns in a new location.

Story by Cathleen Cotter

Photo by Gary McCarthy

"MONA helped because the public would come and see the range of neon," she says.

The idea for the museum also came about because Lakich says she was "sick of being excluded from the art world."

"Neon, kinetic art, anything technical scares most people," she says. "One of the obstacles is people's fear of technology and things they don't understand. It took a while to get people to accept it. But the more it's seen, the more people get used to it."

MONA, which will celebrate its grand reopening in its new permanent home at 501 W. Olympic Blvd. on Saturday, is doing its part to make neon more palatable and accessible to the public. It is a nonprofit organization and is the only one of its kind in the world.

Mary Carter, the executive director of MONA, says the museum was originally located in Little Tokyo for about 12 years. "Then, after the riots, we had to leave Downtown," she says. "We went to Universal City-Walk and had a small space there. We closed at City-Walk almost a year ago."

Now the hiatus is almost over and the first show at the new location promises to be worthy of the museum's history and the celebration of its 15th year.

Visitors to the show will be pleasantly surprised, especially those who have never seen the medium used

lights mounted on metal, especially brushed or polished aluminum. The reflective property of the metal in combination with the bright lights draws the viewer in with an almost magnetic power.

Lakich creates all of the sculpture herself, but she does not do her own glass bending.

"When I started [working with neon], I was drawing pictures that were too complicated for a novice to do the bending," she says. "I didn't really have the skill and, back then, it really wasn't an option. I would never have been able to bend the things I was drawing."

Other neon artists, especially those who create three-dimensional pieces, such as Tessie Dong and Flechtner, prefer to do their own glass work.

"A lot of artists have learned to do the glass bending themselves," says Flechtner. "If you're going to a sign shop [to have them do the glass bending], you have to work with their limitations."

He says that since many of his pieces are three-dimensional, if he took the pattern to a sign shop to see if they could do it, "they would cry."

"I do all of my own work," says Dong. "I bend my neon to have control over it. I do three-dimensional sculpture and I don't want to have to worry about it."

But neon bending is not as easy as it looks, says

where people all have the same ideas."

Flechtner's work, like Lakich's, has a clean, modern look. But its style is completely different. Many of his pieces are everyday objects, such as a camera or a fish, recreated in neon. And for the exhibit, he is preparing "Poindexter," an optical illusion that will mesmerize and hypnotize viewers.

Dong's pieces are more organic in nature. She says she had been working with metal, stained glass and fiber sculpture, and the neon is an element that she picked up about 10 years ago. "I used to use weaving to get colors," she says, "but I don't any more. The neon is so vibrant. I fall in love with colors."

Unlike some of the other neon artists, Dong's pieces are not a backdrop for the neon elements. Rather, she uses neon to enhance the sculptural aspects of her work. And the combination of metal, stained glass and neon lighting is stunning.

For the show, Dong has created a wall-hanging, "Origami Unfolded," and "Neon Chair," which is really a functional piece that one can sit in.

With such an eclectic mix of artists, whose only common ground is the use of neon, "Electric Muse" promises to be an unusual treat for the eyes. The opening celebration will take place on Saturday from 7 to 10 p.m. For more information, please call (213) 489-9918.