



GLENN KOENIG *Los Angeles Times*

**CREATOR:** Chris Green with an anaconda he designed based on springs under his couch. The installation opens June 26.

# A grander scale

Skirball hopes to bring them in, more than two by two, with 'Ark.'

By **LYNNE HEFFLEY**  
*Times Staff Writer*

**S**OME view a strip of tire tread as trash. Brooklyn-based artist and puppeteer Chris Green envisions a crocodile. Wind turbines are zebra haunches. Pink flamingos arise from an amalgam of wood and bamboo, combs, spools of thread, flea market purses and plastic fly swatters.

Shaped by Green's fertile imagination, the oddly lifelike critters are among the many inhabitants of "Noah's Ark," a new play-oriented, hands-on, animal-centric realization of the flood story opening June 26 at the Skirball Cultural Center.

Five years in the making, the 8,000-square-foot, \$5-million, non-religious permanent installation is a deliberate redefinition of the Jewish heritage institution as a destination attraction for families of all backgrounds, expanding the center's big-

tent philosophy, says Uri D. Herscher, founding president and chief executive.

"It enriches our mission by welcoming an audience that we hadn't welcomed with the same focus before, children and their extended families," he says. "It really is early childhood education while at play."

"Noah's Ark" was designed by Seattle-based Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects with Skirball architect Moshe Safdie. It occupies the entire second floor of the center's three-story, 3-year-old Winnick Hall wing, a previously vacant space. It encompasses an outdoor amphitheater and a "rainbow mist" installation by Safdie with environmental artist Ned Kahn.

At its core: an enormous walk-in wooden ark in two parts, filled with life-size animals —

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# Animals, not Noah, run this 'Ark'

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and messages of community, character-building, cooperation and respect for nature based on the Hebrew story of Noah and the flood stories and myths of other cultures. The installation, developed by Skirball staffer Marni Gittleman, features educational and play activities in a setting of low-tech Victorian-era cranks and wheels. There are no representations of people, not even a Noah. ("Animals have less baggage," Herscher says.)

Life-affirming themes, Gittleman says, are underscored by the use of sustainable, fair trade, environment-friendly, found-object and recycled materials.

That's where Green, 35 — tall and rail-thin, with an emphatic nose and hair whiskered into startled tufts — comes in. His dozens of repurposed- and found-object puppets and kinetic sculptures are only a fraction of the more than 350 animals on display, yet all agree that his are key to the installation.

## Foreground concept

Designs for all the animals were dependent on whether creatures would exist as "foreground, background or middle-ground figures," says Olson Sundberg principal Allen Maskin, who, with the L.A.-based fabrication house Lexington, created most of the beasts. But Green's were conceived as foreground animals "having the most detail and the most craft, because you would look at them eye to eye and touch them."

Green took the concept further, making it possible for the animals to come alive: His sculptures are stationary — bolted into position — but visitors can, for instance, spin the zebras' wind-turbine bodies, ring a deer's gong heart or lift, lower and curve the necks of two 16-foot giraffes.

His portable puppets — anacondas, snow leopards, vultures, flamingos, foxes and more — add yet another dimension. Whether rod, marionette or wearable bunraku-style, they "rest" in the ark, waiting for specially trained puppeteers to bring them to life periodically during the day. Green talks about his creations with affection: Kiwi birds are fashioned from antique children's boxing gloves, he says, because "they're feisty little punchy dudes."

A wall-mounted sika deer, modeled after the endangered Asian subspecies, has an upside-down tractor seat frame for a rump because "tractor seats are already shaped that way, so I just flipped it. And, of course," he adds, deadpan, "it's from a John Deere tractor."

A polar bear's ice-bucket neck is connected to a body that

is part old-time claw-foot bathtub, part fiberglass mold resembling a mound of ice. Pieces of tire tread curve to form crocodiles whose heads are violin cases, their drawer-pull eyes socketed in vintage kid gloves.

An Asian elephant is modeled after a collapsible toy from India. Its skull was about to get a skin of handmade paper from Nepal, applied by Green and assistant Eric Novak. Life-sized zebras sport plastic organ key manes, because "ivory next to an elephant? That just wouldn't work," Green says.

The ark bellies up from the floor below the mezzanine entrance. It's faced by a floor-to-ceiling "storm wall" fitted with noise-makers that allow visitors to create rain, wind and thunder sounds. Green's hand-cranked thaumatrope, attached to the wall, twirls wooden blocks to reveal metal birds in flight.

"I wanted to make sure that I covered all the bases," Green says. "That it's fun, it's meaningful, it's touchable."

To find materials, he canvassed eBay and obscure paper-makers, basket-weavers and wood suppliers. He spotted stuff on the street, in junk shops, even under the furniture.

"I dropped something and reached under the couch and saw these upholstery springs," he says, indicating the zigzag interlocking springs that form the bodies of two anaconda puppets.

A core group of puppeteers was chosen by Green through auditions; gallery staff make up the balance. In training, he told them that the animals should exhibit natural behavior: "They don't talk. They aren't characters."

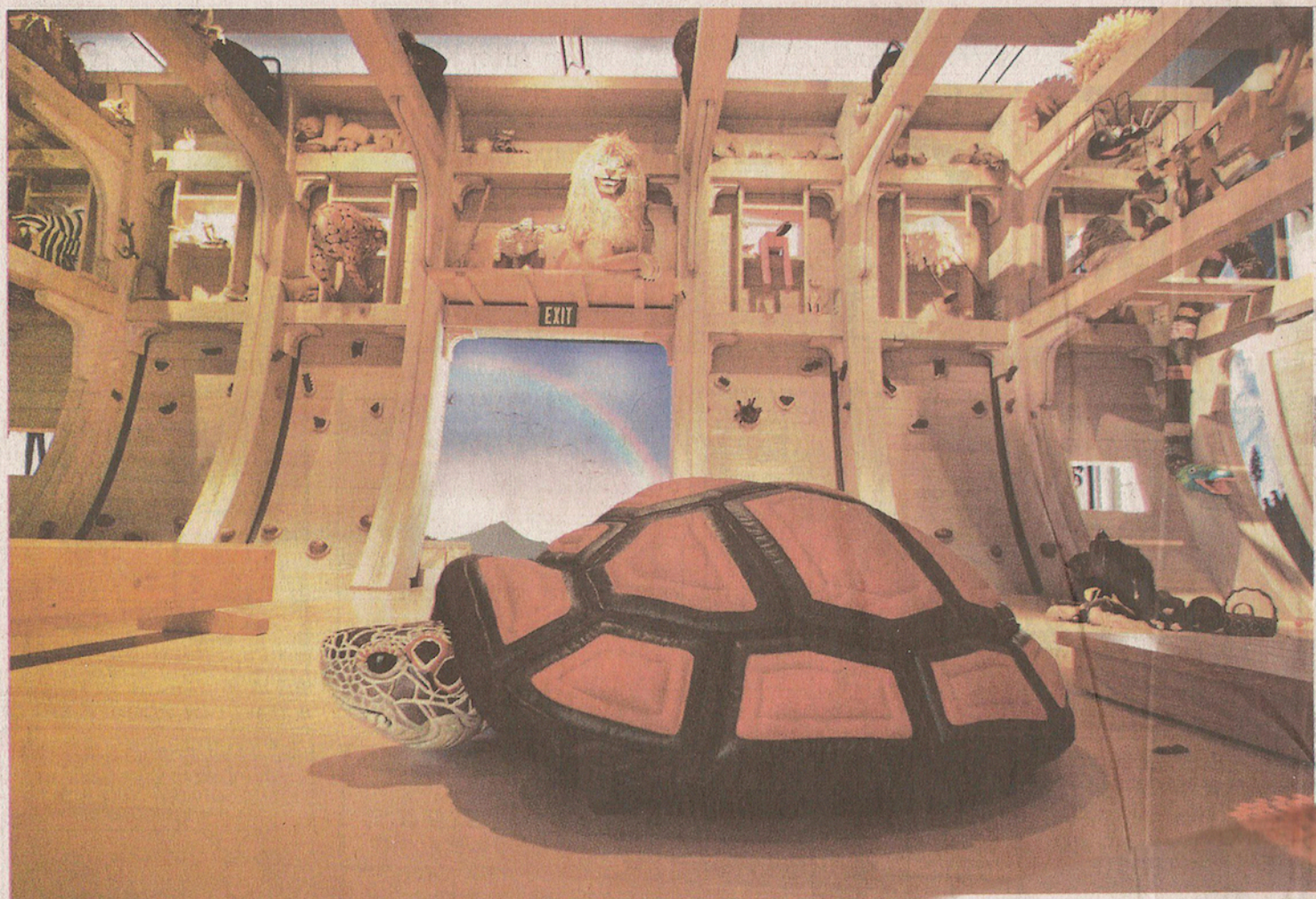
"You can tackle any issue or any emotion with this work," he says. "You can make things almost more powerful, viable than with live actors."

His "shy but playful" long-tailed langur monkey had proved especially challenging for three auditioning puppeteers. "Can you get the monkey from the table to the floor without jumping?" he asked them. The trio tried. The monkey gripped with its feet, rested its weight on its hands and climbed down to the floor so naturally that the room broke out in applause.

## 'A learning curve'

Later he teamed up gallery staff to operate snow leopards and flamingos. One head was too bouncy. "If it's out of control, you've got a drunken leopard," Green warned.

"It's a learning curve for all of us," he says. "It's site-specific work in a complex environment with people. It could really make



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**ON BOARD:** A tortoise (created by Olson Sundberg principal Allen Maskin and fabrication house Lexington) emerges from his shell.



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

**LIFE-SIZE:** Chris Green's designs include this elephant, a deer with a gong-able heart and zebras whose bodies children can spin.

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— CHRIS GREEN

Brooklyn-based artist and puppeteer, on his "Noah's Ark" creations

or break someone's experience." Green's tallest kinetic sculptures are the towering giraffes, one with a dappled coat of curved plywood over a metal framework, a "cracked earth" terra cotta effect inspired by the look of ancient pottery shards and the savanna habitat.

Despite their eccentric construction, Green's creations aren't cartoonish. Most have realistic heads carved from basswood and painted in subtle colors. The hope, he says, is to inspire a sense of connection to the natural world.

"I knew that there was only so much I could convey, apart from the use of repurposed materials and the love of animals. I want

people to feel that they love these things, not that they're here for their entertainment or that they're selling you something."

That world view comes naturally to the soft-spoken artist-educator, who has created adult and experimental puppet theater for festivals and worked with Vermont's Bread and Puppet Theater and master puppeteer Basil Twist.

Green also co-founded the American-Bulgarian Strandzha Project — interpretations of Bulgarian archeological material through object/puppet theater. As artist in residence at Woodstock School in India, he used puppet theater in an exchange between international students



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

**MONKEY BUSINESS:** Anna Dresdon, left, Susan Morrow (in green) and Jasmine Orpilla rehearse with a golden langur puppet.

and Tibetan refugee children.

But he had never tackled anything of the scope of "Noah's Ark," making him a surprise choice for such a prominent role in the project.

"His résumé was certainly terrific," Maskin says, "but it was Chris as a person that convinced us when we met him. We knew it

was a risk, but sometimes it's a risk not to take a risk, and this is one that turned out beautifully."

Herscher says: "I don't believe that what you see could have been achieved without Chris Green's genius. His lenses on the world are unique."

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