

Photographers Find a New Way to See El Toro

By Roy Rivenburg, Times Staff Writer
June 15, 2006

Stand still for 10 days and say "Cheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

That's how long it will take for the world's largest pinhole camera to shoot a record-breaking photo this month in Irvine.

The project is part of an effort to chronicle the demise of the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station as it is converted into a 1,300-acre regional park.

A few weeks ago, six artists began turning a former jet hangar at the base into a massive camera. They drilled a three-quarter-inch hole in the front of the building, then sealed the walls and roof with black plastic and foam to block other light.

For film, they ordered a monstrous piece of muslin -- three stories high and 111 feet long -- and hung it from the ceiling. The giant canvas, big enough to make a garage door seem like a Post-It note, will be coated with the same light-absorbing chemicals used in black-and-white photographs.

Pinhole cameras are "the ancestors of modern cameras," said artist Douglas McCulloh, a collaborator on the El Toro project. When light seeps into a darkened chamber through a tiny hole, it projects an inverted image of what's outside onto the back wall.

During the Renaissance, artists used the technique to draw more realistic images.

Since 2002, McCulloh and five other artists have shot an estimated 80,000 photos at El Toro, including a series of sequential pictures showing the entire 20-mile perimeter of the base.

Photographer Clayton Spada dreamed up the pinhole scheme on a flight back from China, where he had used a truck-sized pinhole camera to snap pictures of various landmarks.

"I was half asleep when I came up with the idea," he confessed. "I figured everyone would say I was nuts, but they all liked it."

The Godzilla-sized black-and-white photograph will capture El Toro's air traffic control tower, runways and nearby coastal hills.

The camera's shutter will need to stay open about 10 days to absorb enough light to produce an image.

After that, the fabric canvas will be rolled up and driven to a Sav-on drugstore for one-hour processing. Just kidding. It will actually be trucked to a hangar at Norton Air Force Base and placed in a custom-built plastic tray filled with photo-developing chemicals.

The leviathan tray was designed by a company that makes portable swimming pools, McCulloh said.

Because, apparently, nobody has ever attempted a photograph of this scale, the artists will test the camera this week with smaller strips of fabric. "This is a high-wire act," McCulloh said.

"There's a million ways to go wrong."

Jacques Garnier, another collaborator, agreed. "Once we start, there's no going back."

If all goes well, officials from Guinness World Records have told the group, the photo will be the world's largest, Garnier said.

So will the camera. And because the hangar will eventually be demolished, McCulloh has dubbed it "the world's largest disposable camera."

To help finance the \$30,000 project, the artists are selling smaller versions of the photo for a minimum \$1,600 each.

But they still have one problem: figuring out where to hang the original.