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Art on Wheels

A classic trailer encampment that's more than a home away from home

by THEO DOUGLAS

Women like vintage trailers much more than men, says Mike Keenan of Orange's M.E.L. Trailers.

"I've found the majority of the people who enjoy this hobby are the women. They're the ones who actually make the initial contact and take the first step," Keenan says on the telephone from M.E.L.'s 6,000-square-foot workshop, where the sound of his partners dismantling old Ideals, Airstreams and Shastas rivet by rivet nearly drowns him out. "The husband comes along, and I feel like he's getting dragged into Nordstrom's."

Yet the husband comes; vintage trailers are hard to resist, which explains Mobile Spaces, the first-ever, Keenan-organized vintage trailer show at the Camp in Costa Mesa. This is not a campout like the yearly Newport Dunes vintage trailer show; you can't buy these trailers. In a few cases, you won't even be able to step inside them. But you will be able to look at them and bask in their reflected glow. On a very basic, primal level, this is more than enough.

"They have a very warm feel, and that's the other thing that's unique," Keenan says. "You can buy a new trailer today, and they're made out of plastics and composites. In 10 years they'll be junk. These trailers today, we [rebuild] them so that they'll last 100 years. That's another piece to it: you've got a piece of functional art that'll last for years."

Vintage trailers are durable by their very existence. What makes them significant is the material and the design, which unwittingly made them art: warm, bright, cozy birch veneers inside, everything battened down like an old Chris Craft cruiser; downsized intimate interiors upholstered in bright, splashy linoleums and barkcloths; gleaming exteriors reminiscent of a test plane, polished and unpainted to save weight.

"Anybody who likes antiques loves them," says Teresa Carey of Victorville. She's the woman Keenan mentioned, who dragged her husband—and their 12-foot, 1958 Ideal trailer—to M.E.L. Trailers. "My husband and I love antiques, and we collect them. I think people have gone into so many other areas that they're looking into something else. It's getting harder and harder to find things like old cars and things like that."

Except in Victorville; the high desert is a great place to locate old trailers—it's actually where the couple found theirs. If Keenan finishes restoring it in time, they can visit it this weekend in Costa Mesa.

MOBILE SPACES: A VINTAGE TRAILER ENCAMPMENT AT THE CAMP, 2937 BRISTOL ST., COSTA MESA, (714) 966-6661. SAT.-SUN., NOON-5 P.M. FREE.