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## Poster to pedestal

By Christopher Reynolds, Times Staff Writer

One day when he was in the fourth grade, Keith Edmier of Tinley Park, Ill., entered a Kay-Bee Toy & Hobby Shop and laid eyes upon a certain poster of a certain smiling actress with blond tresses and a red swimsuit. The year was 1976, maybe 1977, and this was something like love at first sight.

"That image," Edmier said the other day, "was the most beautiful picture I'd ever seen. It was pure."

And it set an imagination in motion. Someday he and Farrah would be together, and barriers would fall away and a video camera would roll, and clothes would be shed, and he'd sculpt Farrah, and Farrah would sculpt him. In fact, Farrah would make a life-size bronze sculpture of him, muscled and naked. And then the results would go on display in the largest encyclopedic art museum west of the Mississippi.

All right, perhaps that's not exactly what Keith Edmier imagined back then. But that's what happened.

Edmier and Farrah Fawcett, once distant figures on opposite ends of the celebrity spectrum, are now collaborators. Their joint artistic venture, "Keith Edmier and Farrah Fawcett 2000," comes to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Thursday as the marquee attraction in an exhibition that examines the relationship between celebrity and fan, and also between projection and reality. The central work is a pair of sculptures: a reclining marble sculpture of her, done mostly by him; and a standing bronze sculpture of him, done mostly by her. Along with the sculptures there are a few smaller works, and photos, video images and sketches made as the project evolved. If this seems odd and unnerving from a distance, it's often been that way up close as well.

On their first day of collaboration, with roles and objectives still largely undefined, "we started undoing the boxes of clay," Fawcett recalled in an interview at Edmier's Venice studio. "I remember being filled with trepidation, thinking 'OK, now, can I touch the clay?'" It was much, much, much more tense than a first date. There was more riding on this."

Their work has drawn backing from the Art Production Fund, a New York-based nonprofit organization that supplies funds for artists' projects; and Rizzoli, which is publishing "Keith Edmier and Farrah Fawcett: Recasting Pygmalion" this month. It also attracted curator Lynn Zelevansky, who brought the project to LACMA.

With this collaboration, Zelevansky writes in an exhibition essay, "Fawcett has played a provocative game ... : She is challenging the public to see her as a complex and engaged human being, not simply the object of projected fantasy."

Of course, LACMA is playing a provocative game too. Though Fawcett's talents as an actress have been widely acknowledged, her greatest fame is as one of television's original "Charlie's Angels" in 1976, and her best-known previous artwork is probably the series of paintings she did in a 1997 Playboy video, applying paint to her body, then rolling on canvases.

"Is this a joke?" asked one LACMA member in an e-mail to the editor after reading of the exhibition. "While there are still things about LACMA I appreciate ... am left scratching my head as to what exactly their commitment to fine art is."

"I knew we'd be accused of sensationalism," said Zelevansky. "But it was a project that I really believed in, initiated by an artist with whom I've wanted to work for many years. And for me, the whole notion of the muse looking back and gaining a voice is a very important idea."

The project began with Edmier, 35, who studied at CalArts and worked in the film business (he did special-effects makeup on "Barton Fink," "Texas Chainsaw Massacre III" and other movies) before moving to New York and embarking on a career as an artist in the early 1990s. For most of the last decade, his specialty has been the grown-up probing, in sculpture, of his own old, childish ideas.

For one piece in 1996, Edmier tracked down Evel Knievel, an old hero. For another piece, he invoked the girl who inspired his first crush -- a girl who wore her blond hair in a feathered style inspired by a certain television star. Through these and other sculptures and installations, Edmier won a growing reputation, including solo gallery shows from New York to London, Paris and Berlin.

But he hadn't found a way to face head-on that transcendent moment in the toy store -- until 1999. Then, after one letter failed to get through, he found a way to reach the actress, relying on curator Irene Tsatsos of Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions as an intermediary.





As Edmier knew from an old profile in the teen magazine Dynamite, Fawcett studied art herself. In fact, the year Edmier was born, 1967, Fawcett was a 20-year-old art major at the University of Texas at Austin. Her professional acting career took off the following year when she moved to Los Angeles for the summer. Years later, as a television and movie star living in the Hollywood Hills, she set up a tin-shed art studio in her yard.

Once the studio space was secured and supplies were on hand, "we basically just started pushing clay around, talking," Edmier recalled.

Working on an early press release to summarize their project, "we'd get as far as, 'Keith and Farrah intend ... ' and he'd get hysterical laughing," Fawcett said.

The sculpture of Fawcett was cast in fiberglass, shipped to Italy and copied by craftsmen into marble. The figure of Edmier was cast in bronze in upstate New York. Among the other pieces they made together: multiples of "Shell," a large clamshell made of melted crayons and filled with beach sand from Padre Island, Texas. A handful of the smaller pieces have been exhibited in Europe, but the central dual portrait is going public for the first time.

The male figure, on the other hand, stands tall and conceals nothing. That posed a challenge for Fawcett, who'd never sculpted male genitals before. Yet the strangest thing about posing nude, said Edmier, was "how normal it all felt."

Along the way, Edmier and Fawcett learned enough about each other that the two of them, both single, can do a fair imitation of a long-married couple. In fact, Edmier said, "we've had a personal relationship." Between them, it is established that he is the morning person, she is the night person. He is inclined to trust his memory; she takes notes, makes sketches, dates Polaroids. He is the one who has worked with unorthodox materials like dental acrylic; she is the one with more experience in clay.

Working with Edmier, Fawcett decided, was "like meeting with a secure director, a Robert Altman, who says, 'What are your ideas?' " And in their working relationship, she added, "we were able to sort of leave my celebrity out of it."

Whether or not the art is worthwhile, audiences and critics will soon have a chance to judge. And the marketplace may as well. Edmier and Fawcett will replicate some of their works in editions of up to 10, and Edmier's dealer, Friedrich Petzel in New York, has already sold three pieces from the "Shell" edition. (Petzel declined to disclose prices.)

"I hope we can just make some of the costs back," said Edmier.

As for the distance now between the star and the fan, things have changed since that day at the toy store.

"If I had to pick people who really knew me, through work, through frustration, through extreme happiness, through extreme creativity -- you know, the whole realm -- I would say: Keith does," said Fawcett. "And he's known me for less time than a lot of people."

