For many, artwork is not a bright spot

San Pedro's robotic eye-on-a-pole, watching passersby down below, is getting a mostly cool reception. Just wait until it shines a light on folks.

By Deborah Schoch, Times Staff Writer
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Already, Mojo is making people uneasy.

They don't know what to make of this angular robot that stands like a sentry atop a 30-foot pole on a San Pedro street corner. When pedestrians walk by, it eventually will shine a roving light on them, following them along the sidewalk.

Maybe its giant orange-rimmed eye is an undercover security camera, they speculate. Maybe it's a floodlight, or a laser gun, or a cleverly disguised dish for satellite TV.

Actually, Mojo is an artwork created by Christian Moeller, a UCLA design professor who has won widespread acclaim for interactive pieces on display in Tokyo, Frankfurt, Germany, London and New York.

Mojo won't start moving its robotic arm for another few weeks. But some in this seaport neighborhood of Los Angeles say they don't understand it or like it. Some in local arts circles frown because an outsider rather than a homegrown artist has taken center stage.

"It's not a piece of art that's really resonated with the public or the arts community," said Life on the Edge local blog contributor Marshall Astor, an artist and the visual arts director at Angels Gate Cultural Center in San Pedro. "There's a percentage of people who think it's ridiculous."

Still, he added, "It could grow on people. I'm hoping it grows on me."

It's not so much that folks oppose an odd-looking sculpture in their midst. They are suspicious because Mojo, guided by two surveillance cameras, homes in on passersby with a light.

"Orwellian," one critic wrote on the blog. Another called it the "perfect quasi-bohemian yuppie bait," allowing condo owners to feel more artsy and, at the same time, more secure against car thefts.

Some have started to enjoy the sinister feel of it all.

"It's creepy. I like creepy," said another local artist, Daniel Nord.

Mojo stands in front of the Centre Street Lofts, a new condominium development that is drawing well-heeled buyers to units that start in the high $300,000s. The sculpture at 7th and Centre streets overlooks a seedy intersection better known for the Godmother Saloon, the low-rent Hotel Cabrillo and Anytime Happy Liquor.

Mike Saunders, a disabled veteran who lives in one room at the hotel, is so taken with the robot that he propped a canvas on his fire escape and started painting. His unfinished acrylic shows Mojo zapping a small human figure with a laser. Saunders said he meant that in jest, a reflection of his neighbors' wariness.
"I don't care if everyone hates it. I love it," said Saunders, 47. "Life is too serious. Here is something nonsensical, right in front of you. A tangible cartoon, you could call it."

Brent Kuhn, project engineer with Carlson & Co., which fabricated the sculpture, thinks of Mojo as a lonely robot, moving about aimlessly in the dark until it locks onto a passerby with a beam of light.

"It's looking for a companion," Kuhn said.

Developer Harlan Lee, who recommended Moeller for the $252,000 project, is not surprised by the stir. It reminds him of the initial reaction to "Ballerina Clown," the 1989 moving sculpture by Jonathan Borofsky that accompanies a building Lee developed at Main Street and Rose Avenue in Venice.

Some people called the clown perverted and ugly. L.A. Times art critic Christopher Knight, however, described it as a momentous piece of public art, "a figure rather like an eccentric, street side orator magically elevated to civic symbol."

Lee Homes and the CIM Group developed Centre Street Lofts and had to commit 1% of development costs to public art because the project is in a redevelopment zone.

"What I wanted," Lee said, "was something that's interactive with the people, something that will create dialogue."

Moeller said he anticipated spirited debate — but not before Mojo has started sweeping the sidewalks with light.

How can people interpret a work of art, he asked, before it is finished?

Moeller, 47, is known for art that juxtaposes humans with technology. A 2004 piece at London's Science Museum consisted of a stainless steel pole surrounded by a round sign warning, "Do Not Touch." Those who touched the pole received a mild electric shock.

Mojo is one of the first in a series of robotic projects, Moeller said. In Tokyo, a robot called Nosy uses a camera to record images of passersby and project their silhouettes on three tall towers.

He said Mojo was inspired by the dozens of cargo cranes, with their robot-like arms, bristling along the waterfront. The light is modeled on Angel's Gate lighthouse.

"When you put a sophisticated industrial machine and a lighthouse together, you get Mojo," he said.

He winces at the notion that the robot is a glorified security system. The surveillance cameras that guide the robot do not even record images, he said. Still, Mojo conveys the same eerie feel of being spied upon that people experience at seaports, airports and train stations in a post-9/11 world.

"It makes a big deal visually out of 'I am watching you,' " Moeller said.

When Mojo starts moving, San Pedrans may find it more endearing.

Moeller reached for his laptop and pulled up an early animation of Mojo craning its neck giraffe-style to see a passerby, then withdrawing, like an amiable character in a cartoon.

"It's the forgotten guy sitting on its pedestal," he said.

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A video of Mojo and a link to other examples of Christian Moeller's work can be found at http://www.latimes.com/mojo .

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