

We're Not in Macy's Anymore...

These local stores aren't middle of the road. In fact, some aren't even on the map.

BY TERENCE LOOSE

If you've ever found yourself in Best Buys moving toward the checkout line with the latest little boombox in hand but thinking: "This is nice but what I really need is one that will play Chopin and spy on the nanny," this article is for you. As it is if you've never found the right gift for that thankfully aloof uncle who thinks he's a modern-day Ishmael. Yes, if you've been craving the companionship of a mature Chinese water dragon, this is your lucky day. For below are ten shops that have taken the retail road less-traveled, where the scenery ranges from sweet to colorful to cool to, well, just plain weird. So, don't just shop this holiday season, have some fun for once.

Art for the Soul

210 MARINE AVE. BALBOA ISLAND

This Balboa Island shop is not for everyone, but if you like a healthy dose of wackiness, need inspiration from your mirror in the morning, or are a cutting-edge Jew, get down there right right away. And if you don't fall into any of the above categories, go anyway, it's a blast. Where else can you find a poeing papier-mâché dog under the same roof as an impressionistic menorah? How does it all tie together? "Everything in the store is either inspirational or whimsical," says owner Valinda Martin, who discovered the power of being positive after a boating accident confined her to a wheel chair. "I found that I really needed a lot of inspiration and laughter," she says. In her new store, she finds it daily. Take the hot-selling and hot-colored handmade mirrors. They don't just send your tired old mug flashing back at you; they jump-start your day with inspiring sayings. Other customer faves include the papier-mâché animal clocks (bring in a picture of your pet and have one custom made); the contentious chess boards (Men vs. Women, Democrats vs. Republicans and of course, UCLA vs. USC) and Dolly, the rollerskating manzanita tree giraffe. Of course, not everyone is inspired by Martin's shop. "We get a few complaints about the peeing and poeing dogs," Martin says.

