

ON EXHIBIT Festival puts art in the wild and in the public's view

[ALL Edition]

Providence Journal - Bulletin - Providence, R.I.

Author: BILL VAN SICLEN Journal-Bulletin Arts Writer

Date: Aug 4, 1995

Start Page: E.01

Document Text

For better or worse, most of the art that's made today is intended to be seen indoors, either in galleries, museums or private homes. The reasons range from the practical (many art works are simply too fragile to live outside) to the perceptual (most artists prefer the great indoors, with its uniform lighting and neatly defined rooms, to the great outdoors, with its changeable weather and wide open spaces).

Still, there are a few artists who actually enjoy working in the wild. Which is where the Convergence Arts Festival comes in. For the past eight summers, Convergence has commissioned a series of large-scale sculptures for the grounds of Roger Williams Park. In the process - and without much fanfare, even in its hometown - it has become one of the most prominent showcases for contemporary outdoor sculpture in the Northeast.

Much of the credit for Convergence's success goes to the Providence Parks Department, which puts on the festival, and Bob Rizzo, the Parks Department official who does most of the hands-on work. According to Rizzo, the festival's goal is to present top-quality examples of contemporary sculpture and installation in a public setting.

"We want to give people who don't normally go to galleries and museums a chance to see what's going on in contemporary sculpture," Rizzo says. "We're trying to bring art out of the gallery and into the public domain."

That's not to say that all the festival's sculptures are created equal.

Missouri artist Karen McCoy, for example, is represented by a floating pyramid of quahog shells. The sculpture, which is in the center of Polo Lake, was inspired by the carved clam and quahog shells that native New England peoples used as money and ceremonial objects. But on a recent visit to the park, the sculpture looked less like a poetic evocation of Native American culture than the remains of last weekend's clambake.

For the most part, however, this year's Convergence entries fall comfortably in the good-to-very-good range. Not surprisingly, many of them deal with issues relating to nature and the environment.

Maine artist Anne Alexander, for instance, is represented by a group of carved wooden sculptures that have been partially buried in the ground near the Roger Williams Park rose garden. Their gracefully knobby shapes suggest everything from giant tulip bulbs to monster acorns to oversized porcini mushrooms.

East Greenwich artist Susannah Strong, meanwhile, has hung a series of elegant cloth-and-wire sculptures in the trees near the Temple to Music. Narrow at the top and bottom, and wide in the middle, they look like the cocoons of some giant species of moth or butterfly.

Even better is the installation by Providence architect Peter Stempel in Cunliffe Lake near the Temple to Music. Consisting of dozens of ceramic buoys that are arranged in neat, grid-like rows, Stempel's piece doesn't look like much at first glance. But then you notice how the rows of buoys echo the classical columns on the Temple to Music. The resemblance isn't accidental: Stempel wants to get us to thinking about classical ideas of order and harmony and how these ideas are translated not only into buildings but into the manmade landscapes of parks and gardens.

Also good is Dorothy Imagine's Alien Nation at the Roger Williams Park greenhouses. Here the familiar postcard-sized signs that greenhouses and arboretums use to identify exotic plants are employed to make a political point - that many of the shrubs and flowers that live in American gardens are actually foreign imports. Thus the Shasta daisy is identified as a "European-American," the zinnia as "Mexican-American" and the azalea and rhododendron as "Asian-Americans." Without anti-immigrant sentiment on the rise, Imagine reminds us that we are a nation of immigrants, both ethnically and horticulturally. Oasis in a visual desert

My favorite work in this year's Convergence festival, however, isn't in Roger Williams Park. It's in downtown Providence on a traffic island between Memorial Boulevard and the Providence Post Office Annex in Kennedy Plaza. It's called Tilted House, and it's by a New Hampshire artist named James Owen Calderwood. True to its name, Tilted House consists of a big house-shaped sculpture that has been tipped up on one side, like a ballet dancer standing en pointe.

I like this piece for several reasons.

First, it perks up an area that desperately needs perking up. Waterplace Park is a wonderful place, but much of the area around it is a visual (and cultural) desert. Second, I like the way Calderwood has made a familiar form unfamiliar simply by giving it a different twist - or tilt. Finally, I like the way Tilted House manages to be both playful and thoughtful. After all, if a house stands for stability, protection, shelter and family, a tilted house suggests upheaval and instability. The fact that Tilted House is located in an urban setting, where the problems of crime, homelessness and family breakdown are major issues, only makes it that much more at home.

As a final note, the Convergence Arts Festival is sponsoring performances by poet Derik Prosper (2 p.m.), blues singer Mary Flower (3 p.m.) and blues guitarist Paul Geremia (4 p.m.) on Aug. 13 at the Roger Williams Park Bandstand. All performances are free and open to the public.

The Convergence Arts Festival continues through Sept. 30 at Roger Williams Park, 1000 Elmwood Ave. in Providence. Maps showing the location of festival sculptures are available at the Roger William Park Zoo, Carousel and Museum of Natural History.

CAPTION: CERAMIC BUOYS, arranged by Peter Stempel in Cunliffe Lake, echo the columns on the Temple to Music at Roger Williams Park.

Journal-Bulletin / RACHEL RITCHIE

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

For better or worse, most of the art that's made today is intended to be seen indoors, either in galleries, museums or private homes. The reasons range from the practical (many art works are simply too fragile to live outside) to the perceptual (most artists prefer the great indoors, with its uniform lighting and neatly defined rooms, to the great outdoors, with its changeable weather and wide open spaces).

Still, there are a few artists who actually enjoy working in the wild. Which is where the Convergence Arts Festival comes in. For the past eight summers, Convergence has commissioned a series of large-scale sculptures for the grounds of Roger Williams Park. In the process - and without much fanfare, even in its hometown - it has become one of the most prominent showcases for contemporary outdoor sculpture in the Northeast.

Much of the credit for Convergence's success goes to the Providence Parks Department, which puts on the festival, and Bob Rizzo, the Parks Department official who does most of the hands-on work. According to Rizzo, the festival's goal is to present top-quality examples of contemporary sculpture and installation in a public setting.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.