

David Eckard's belly images of "American tragedies" were conversation starters on the Rio de Janeiro.

COURTESY OF
DAVID ECKARD



■ In Brazil, Northwest artists wove others' views the U.S. into their work

By JOSEPH GALLIVAN
The Tribune

The Portland art scene is constantly questioning how local it is versus how national, but for a real shake-up it's hard to match what happened in January: Six Portland artists and eight students from the Pacific Northwest College of Art went to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, as the return leg of a cultural exchange with the art gallery A. Gentil Carioca.

You may remember when the

Artists take a bit of Portland, come back with pieces of Rio

Brazilians came here in 2005. Internationally known sculptor Ernesto Neto assembled a tent of stretch nylon and sandbags in the art school's common area, while in the window Laura Lima showed live chickens decked out in colored feathers like samba dancers.

The local curators, Nan Curtis and Elana Mann, soon chose six artists, who had 18 months to think about what they would do for the exchange. They were:

■ Bruce Conkle, who is known for his Northwest landscapes full

of Douglas firs and sasquatches.

■ David Eckard, who does performance/sculpture such as Float, when he drifted down the Willamette River last September on a contraption of his own making, declaiming on one of his trademark megaphones.

■ Don Olsen, who draws.

■ Emily Ginsburg, whose graphic silhouettes on paper were included in the latest Oregon Biennial.

■ M.K. Guth, a sculptor who

Looking at U.S. from afar

The gallery A Gentil Carioca, which means roughly “the kind person from Rio,” has a casual approach to art.

“The way they run the gallery is it’s not so divided,” Eckard says. “You walk in and it’s not an ice-cold cube.”

The founders asked the Portlanders to do work that was “temporal and integrated into the neighborhood,” he says.

Eckard built a prosthetic stomach that housed dioramas depicting “Five American tragedies, moments when America turned on itself.” So for a few hours a day on

five consecutive days he would stand in the street under an umbrella, with interpreters, and wait for people to check him out. The dioramas showed the hosing of civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963; current Ku Klux Klan activities; a lynching in Indiana in 1930; the McCarthy hearings; and the Japanese internment during World War II.

“They’d ask what was going on, then it would turn into a conversation among the onlookers, like, ‘Hey, that’s like how people are restricted in the *favelas* here,’ or a discussion about Brazil’s role in World War II ...”

For once Eckard found himself invisible in his own street theater. “In Portland, when I did my Seribe thing, people would come up and go, ‘Ooh what’s that?’ thinking it was some weird mo-



ment, but when they’d hear it’s an art project they go, ‘Oh,’ ” as though bored or disappointed.

Eckard also found a widespread assumption that all Americans are “gung ho” about the Iraq war.

M.K. Guth’s work consisted of braiding long pieces of artificial hair. (The idea grew from her recent installation referencing Rapunzel.) Gallery visitors were provided with ribbons on which to write. Guth wrote her instructions on the wall: “Please offer your opinions on people from the United States.”

“The way opinions work is you know they’re going on, but you don’t know what they are,” Guth says. This was her way of getting them out.

Many comments praised the technology, the movies, the music and the people of the United States. Many disapproved of President Bush and the Iraq war.

“You are lost in the fog,” was one such comment.

Artists saw Lego, real cities

In the sweaty pressure cooker of Rio, culture sought out the visitors.

They noticed the graffiti was artfully done, with artists working together rather than defacing each other’s work. Music, too, was integrated into everyday life, with people drumming



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Above: Visitors could write their opinions of the U.S. on ribbons to hang on M.K. Guth’s braids of fake hair.

Left: Bruce Conkle’s hanging ecosystem reflected Rio’s own vertical strata, physical and economic.

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and singing spontaneously.

They got a tour of a local samba school, normally impossible, since the highly competitive schools are more like production companies wary of industrial espionage. They sweated through long, meaty barbecues.

And at their B&B they met a Dutch filmmaker who took them to Pereirão, a *favela* above the Laranjeiras neighborhood, to see the Morrinho (literally “little hill”). This is a model of the slums,

made of bricks and populated by Lego people. The boys who made it stage animated plays with the dolls that are shown on Nickelodeon in Latin America, and the project was recently selected for this year’s Venice Biennial.

So what, exactly, did they exchange?

“The students who went to Rio have been sitting in (the Commons) for two weeks radiating, because they know something that no one else does,” Guth says.



and her assistants six days to find a car to strip and turn into “Mare Tranquillitatis (Sea of Tranquility).”

COURTESY OF TAMSIE RINGLER



“In a world so hard, with bus bombings, murders, gunfire at night, this gave them the confidence to deal with this cultural freak-out. What the students brought back was confidence.”

During their stay a 6-year-old suburban Brazilian boy was caught up in a carjacking. His mother got her other kids clear, but he was entangled in his seat belt as the car drove off. He was dragged for 2 miles, ending up headless and footless, curled in the fetal position.

“The whole city was dressed in black the next day in mourning,” Guth says.

They all learned to think on

their feet, artistically. Olsen’s work was a drawing that merged Portland and Rio, and Conkle planned a similar sculpture, although lack of scavengable parts meant he had to rethink his work completely after three days. He ended up rigging up a closed system of water, plants and fish that mimicked Rio’s vertical strata, both social and geographical.

“I wanted to use local materials, to not say, ‘Here’s what we can do and you can’t,’” Conkle says.

They enjoyed great hospitality, although Portland was new territory for most of the Brazilians they met. The artists usually described it as “north of California.” Mostly they were just considered “the Americans.”

One thing they are proud of is a review in Brazilian newspaper O Globo pointing out that their work seemed integrated into the community, which is a principle of A Gentil Carioca.

For the Brazilian gallery, to have had emerging artists come work in the city as peers, as opposed to established artists just coming to show their work, Ginsburg says, “is a more meaningful gesture.”

“Instead of blue chip artists going, ‘This is how it’s done,’ ” Ringler adds.

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