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Art is everywhere

Convergence X is a visual feast

by **Bill Rodriguez**

Bob Rizzo says goodbye, clicks his cell phone closed, and goes back to his nice, dry glass of Fetzer cabernet. He is trying to unwind after another pressure-cooker morning crossing t's and dotting i's as D-day looms. Rizzo doesn't much look like your typical harried city bureaucrat, although only his mustache has any black in it, as though hard work has drained his beard and ponytail to gray. Heavy silver bangles on his wrist also indicate that he is more than director of public programming for the Providence Department of Public Parks. On his own time, he is also an artist, although it is on his day job that he has created his magnum opus: the Convergence art festivals each June. This year is their 10th anniversary.



"Last year I thought I was going to lose my mind, trying to be in two places at once," Rizzo says, referring to the art festival taking place both in downtown Providence and in Roger Williams Park, his primary bailiwick. "It's really impossible. We have a real small staff -- just two other folks besides myself. "With this shift being slightly away from sculpture, it made more sense to concentrate on downtown," he adds. This year the event, which takes place June 12-22, will have fewer sculptures and more performance and participation events, from a treasure hunt to an "art boat" competition. Having it downtown also avoids competition with the fiberglass dinosaurs that recently arrived at Roger Williams Park Zoo, which make it harder for visitors to drive around and see the outdoor sculptures that are left from last year's festival.

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Rizzo is sitting in Café Nuovo. Near the restaurant entrance, in the lobby of the Citizens Bank building, there is one of the Convergence sculptures, "Floating Device," by Michael Hansel of Newport, looking like a large copper- and lead-sheathed jelly-fish. Outside the tall windows is a view of the Woonasquatucket River, which is bracketed up and down by more sculptures. The scenic walkways on both sides of the rivers that converge there have been designated Waterplace Park, adding more acreage to the city park system that Rizzo has been charged to fill with art and activities.

This year's Convergence will be the biggest and most ambitious art festival Providence has ever had, as befits a 10th anniversary. It will be even bigger than last year's event, which attracted the International Sculpture Conference to Providence, after Convergence had given the town such a wide reputation as a showplace for public sculpture. This year there will be fewer sculptures, about two dozen, and more performances, with 33 events under its umbrella. Rizzo's phone is still ringing off the hook with calls from national press and travel writers.

"That's what's always been wonderful about Convergence. I could tweak it any way I wanted," he says. "Convergence is lots of things."

Prominent for size and audacity among the art components this year are:

* "Liquor Amnii," in which five women artists from Mobius Artists Group of Boston and five from Skopje, Macedonia, will create individual site-specific installations as well as collective performance art on the river at the foot of College Street. June 19-21.

* "The Construction of Art: Vanguard At the Armory," a collaborative mixed media construction in the Cranston Street Armory. Organized by Bert Gallery, art and architecture will be combined on several stories, with scaffolding and tarpaulins, by artists Lee Dimeo, Erik Goulb, Frank Gasbarro, Riva Leviten, Paula Martesian and Kenneth Speiser. June 14 and 15 from 12 to 4 p.m., with an opening night benefit dance.

* "Water/Fire," by Barnaby Evans, which combines those two elements and creates awe. Lightings began June 4 and will take place on June 14 and 21 for Convergence and through the summer.

Tying Convergence further in-town are events that would be happening anyway at some point in the summer, such as Groundwerx Dance Theater's 10th anniversary Dance Festival Decadance, plays at Perishable Theatre and Alias Stage, the Pan-Twilight Circus, the Art Trolley gallery tours, and Providence Preservation Society's annual Tours of Historic Houses.

"That was part of the plan from day one, to take advantage of all the stuff that already happens in Providence. That was one of the points I wanted to make with all of this -- there's always a lot of activity going on," Rizzo says. "I don't know about you, but if I tried to do everything that's out there, I wouldn't have a life."

A few years ago, he points out, once you took out-of-state summer guests to the few things happening in town, that was it. But now most weekends there are an

assortment of choices. Convergence, he says, is enhancing the opportunities rather than starting from scratch.

And did he have an inkling, back when Convergence was merely an ambition, that the arts festival would expand as it has?

"Believe it or not, it's always had a 10-year plan," he explains. "Bringing it into downtown was always part of that natural progression. I'd always intended to grow it in Roger Williams Park, utilizing the 430 acres I had there and tuning it and then bringing it in here. Because I knew that once I brought it downtown it was going to take on a whole new life, which it has."

Rizzo's esthetic competence in selecting art proposals was testified to last year when the sculpture conference came to Providence and Convergence IX made the cover of *Sculpture* magazine. But his concept for Convergence has never been exclusively avant-garde or academic.

"What we're doing is design for the general public. It's not designed specifically for an art audience," he stresses. "Once they understand that you're not looking for some artsy description or understanding, they understand that what they see is valid, and how they react is valid."

He has had countless exchanges that have impressed him with the ability of casual pedestrians to "get" abstract sculpture, he says. "They'll make a comment and you'll see them a little timid. But once you say, 'No, no -- that's probably exactly what the artist meant,' they become very excited."

X is a nice round number, but so is XX. Rizzo is already thinking about future Roman numerals. He expects that some events new this year will spin off on their own as annual happenings, such as the Convergence Film Festival, and perhaps even the outrageous parade of Art Boats, June 21. The latter is a tongue-in-cheek competition, for groups as well as individuals, with such categories as Most Unlikely to Float. He remarks that it was a notion he got after the Convergence canoe and kayak races last year. And what about Convergence XI next year? He must have run out of ideas by now. When he's kidded about combining art and the X Games, his face brightens and he takes off with the notion.

"Yes," he laughs. "Maybe next year we'll do the Extreme Sculpture Games -- I love it!"

See the Convergence supplement in this issue for a complete schedule of events.

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