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Bill Van Sicien reviews “Richard Grosvenor: Newport’s Muse and Mentor” and “Bob Rizzo: Shrines, Icons and Spirits” at the Newport Art Museum

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Richard Grosvenor’s exhibit coincides with his 80th birthday and shows off the full range of his work.

NEWPORT

In many ways, they’re the oddest of odd couples.

One paints, while the other makes sculpture. One has a loyal following in Providence, while the other may be the best known artist on Aquidneck Island. One loves African and pre-Columbian art, while the other would rather spend a day sketching the mansions on Bellevue Avenue. One favors loud Hawaiian shirts, while the

other is more of a khakis-and-polo-shirt kind of guy.

Yet this summer, Bob Rizzo — sculptor, surf-shirt connoisseur and former Providence arts czar — and Richard Grosvenor — painter, teacher and longtime dean of Newport's close-knit art community — find themselves sharing nearby galleries at the Newport Art Museum.

“They’re definitely a study in contrasts,” says NAM curator Nancy Whipple Grinnell, who organized both “Richard Grosvenor: Newport’s Muse and Mentor” and “Bob Rizzo: Shrines, Icons and Spirits.” “Bob, of course, is very well known in Providence. Dick, on the other hand, is a legend in Newport, both as an artist and as a mentor to other artists. Bob is basically self-taught, while Dick was head of the art program at St. George’s School for decades. The list just goes on and on.”

At the same time, Grinnell sees some similarities between the two men. “They’re both very generous, outgoing people,” she says. “And I think that comes across in their work. They may do it in very different ways, but they both know how to put a smile on people’s faces.”

As for the artists, they seem happy just to have a place to exhibit their work.

“A lot of people think that artists make art just for themselves,” Rizzo said during a recent tour of his exhibit, which features about 20 of his trademark neo-primitive sculptures and assemblages. “That may be true in some cases. I think most artists really want their work to be seen and appreciated by other people. We may act like we don’t care. But secretly we crave attention.”

In Rizzo’s case, that craving may be compounded by the fact that he has been out of the public eye for the past few years. The former head of public programming for the Providence Parks Department, Rizzo is probably best known as the driving force behind the Convergence Arts Festival, the annual outdoor art and music festival he co-founded and oversaw from 1987 to 2003

Less well known, though no less important, is Rizzo’s role in launching — actually, re-launching — the city’s most famous piece of public art: WaterFire.

Originally staged as a one-time New Year’s Eve event in 1994, Rizzo persuaded WaterFire creator Barnaby Evans, to mount an encore performance as part of the 2006 Convergence festival. The event, dubbed “Second Fire,” was such a hit that city officials, many of whom had been openly skeptical about the idea of putting a flotilla of bonfires on the downtown rivers, quickly jumped on the WaterFire bandwagon. The rest, as they say, is history.

“At the time, I don’t think anybody realized how big it was going to be,” Rizzo recalled. “There were people who thought we were completely crazy. But look how it turned out.”

In 2003, Rizzo was diagnosed with a chronic heart condition known as cardiomyopathy. The illness, which results in a steep drop in the heart’s blood-pumping ability, didn’t require surgery, but it took months for Rizzo and his doctors to find the right combination of drugs to control the condition. By the time he started feeling better again, Rizzo had decided to make a change.

“Basically, the question became ‘Do I want to keep working for the city, with all the crazy hours and endless red tape? Or do I want to make art?’ ” he said. “And once I asked the question, the answer was easy. I wanted to be an artist a lot more than I wanted to be a bureaucrat.”

Since then, Rizzo has gone from being a sometime artist to a full-time sculptor who regularly exhibits at galleries and museums around the country. He’s also found a highly personal means of expression — a series of rough-hewn figurative sculptures that incorporate “found objects” such as toys, coins, shells and even bits

of cast-off furniture and cabinetry. At once old and new, they draw on sources as diverse as African totem figures, pre-Columbian carvings and Hopi kachina dolls.

“Stylistically, they’re really all over the map,” Rizzo said. “I’m a big fan of African art, so there’s a lot of that in the sculptures. But they also have ties to a lot of things that are happening in contemporary art — things like assemblage and recycling and do-it-yourself.”

Rizzo said the idea for the sculptures came to him several years ago during a trip to Greece. Traveling around the Greek countryside with his wife, Karen, he said he began to notice roadside shrines that people had decorated with coins, jewelry and other personal items.

“They weren’t fancy and a lot of them were in pretty bad shape,” Rizzo recalled. “But there was something very powerful about them. The fact that people were leaving personal items — things that had a history and meaning for them — made a big impression.”

At first, Rizzo tried making his own shrines. A simple wooden box or crate, for example, would be filled with trinkets Rizzo had gathered during one of the long walks he takes every day. (A passionate walker, he doesn’t own a car.) But, then, something strange began to happen.

“They started getting more figurative,” Rizzo said. “Almost before I knew it, they started sprouting hands, arms, feet and heads. I’d take one of the boxes I’d been working on, slap on a pair of legs (often a pair of balusters), add some arms and hands (also usually made from cast-off pieces of furniture) and give them a head (usually a wooden hat rest). Suddenly, they weren’t shrines anymore — or rather, they were shrines that had become people.”

Grinnell says the shrine-figures have been a hit with visitors.

“People love them,” she said. “The school groups especially spend a lot of time with them. Partly, it’s the size of the figures, which are almost exactly the same height as a 5- or 6-year-old. But they’re also fascinated by all the stuff that Bob puts on them.”

More recently, Rizzo has started making paintings that draw on some of the same imagery, including African art and early Christian icon painting, that he uses in his sculptures. Rizzo said he was unhappy with the results until he began attaching smaller versions of his shrine-figures to the canvases, suggesting a cross between African totems and Renaissance altarpieces.

“Hey, I’m an Italian guy who loves African art,” Rizzo said. “It makes perfect sense.”

Grosvenor, meanwhile, is so closely identified with Aquidneck Island that it comes as a shock to learn that he was actually born in the French resort town of St. Jean de Luz.

“That’s right, technically I’m a Frenchie,” he said during an interview in the museum’s Cushing Memorial Wing, where about 30 of his sun-splashed paintings and watercolors are on display. “My father, who was in the textile business, moved the family to France after all the mills moved south in 1920s. So I was actually born on the edge of the Mediterranean.”

When Grosvenor was 5, his family moved back to the States, settling in Newport. Since then, Richard “Dick” Grosvenor (pronounced GROVE-ner) has become a kind of roving cultural ambassador for the city, both as a longtime art teacher at St. George’s School, a private boarding school in Middletown, and as a tireless promoter of Newport-area art and artists.

“Hands down, he’s the best known artist on the island,” said Grinnell. “From the guys down on the wharf to

the folks on Bellevue Avenue, everybody knows Dick Grosvenor.”

The Newport show, which coincides with Grosvenor’s 80th birthday and includes works by former students and family members, shows off the full range of Grosvenor’s work. There are the dynamic urban scenes Grosvenor began making in the 1960s, of which Storrow Drive — a tautly dramatic view of the Boston skyline — is perhaps the show’s signature example.

“That’s a real old-timer,” Grosvenor said of the painting, in which speeding cars race past a series of soaring glass office towers. “Coming from Newport to Boston in the 1960s was such a shock — the city was so much bigger and everything moved so much faster — that I tried to capture that feeling. I guess I succeeded, because looking at that painting still gives me a thrill.”

Not surprisingly, many of the paintings in the show, and in a companion exhibit at the nearby Spring Bull Gallery, depict Newport-area scenes. In most cases, the subjects — among them, lighthouses, sailboats, Newport Harbor, Bellevue Avenue — are treated in a realistic manner, although some include more abstract passages.

One of Grosvenor’s favorite techniques, for example, is to take the edge from a solid object — the prow of a boat, say, or the corner of a house — and extend that line into space. The technique gives some of Grosvenor’s paintings an almost crystalline quality.

“I learned that little trick from Feininger,” Grosvenor said, referring to the German-American cubist painter Lyonel Feininger. “When I was young, I saw one of his paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts. I thought it looked pretty good, so I’ve been using it ever since.”

At the same time, Grosvenor makes no apology for painting in an broadly accessible style.

“I grew up admiring traditional art and that’s what I learned to paint,” he said. “When I was younger, I thought about trying my hand at more abstract work. But ultimately, I realized that it wasn’t my thing.. It might have had my name on it, but it wouldn’t have been mine.”

“Richard Grosvenor: Newport’s Muse and Mentor” runs through Oct. 13 and “Bob Rizzo: Shrines, Icons and Spirits” runs through Sept. 14 at the Newport Art Museum, 76 Bellevue Ave. Hours: Mon.-Sat. 10-5 and Sun. noon-5 (through Labor Day). Admission: \$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 military personnel and students with I.D., 5 and under free. Contact: (401) 848-8200 or www.newportartmuseum.org.