



## Art

# One person's trash becomes artists' treasure in Brockton show

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PROVIDENCE -- Standing in his sunny Mount Pleasant studio, Boris Bally is trying to explain his fascination with cast-off and recycled materials -- materials that many people might consider little more than junk.

"I guess when you get right down to it, it's the idea of making something from nothing," he says. "Not to take anything away from anyone, but making something beautiful with gold is easy. Same thing with glass. But to take a piece of trash and turn it into art, that's special."

Apparently a lot of other artists feel the same way.

In fact, Bally and more than 100 of his fellow hunter-gatherers are the stars of "Trashformations East," an exhibit opening Saturday at Brockton's newly revamped Fuller Craft Museum. (Formerly an all-purpose art museum, the Fuller last year narrowed its focus to contemporary craft.)

"The use of found and recycled objects -- 'trash art,' if you will -- is really big right now," says Fuller director Gretchen Keyworth. "Partly, it's a response to environmental issues such as recycling and sustainability. But it's also a challenge. These artists are taking things that you and I throw away every day and making something fabulous."

Bally, for example, is known for his boldly patterned bowls and platters, which he makes from old traffic signs. In his hands, battered "Stop," "Yield" and "One-Way" signs find new life as functional housewares.

"The colors and graphics are so amazing that they make my job easy," says Bally, who has a bachelor's degree from Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University. "All I do is move things around a little bit."

More recently, Bally has started using another recycled material that, potentially at least, is far more hazardous: handguns. He says he started working with gun parts as a way of publicizing a gun buy-back program organized by the Pittsburgh Police Department.

"Basically, they approached me with the idea of doing something creative with some of the guns they were getting," he explains. "It was sort of a variation on the old swords-into-ploughshares thing."

Eventually, Bally's involvement with anti-violence issues led him to organize "Artists of a Different Caliber," a traveling exhibit of artworks made from recycled firearms. It also inspired Brave, a necklace whose shiny metallic "beads" turn out to be old pistol triggers.

The necklace, in turn, caught the eye of Lloyd Herman, a nationally known craft specialist and former Smithsonian Institution curator who's organizing the "Trashformations" show.

"The police kept sending me these guns, and they kept piling up and piling up," Bally says. "Then I noticed how beautifully detailed some of the triggers were. They had these delicate little grooves and hatchings to give your finger a better grip. That was the inspiration."

Another contributor to the "Trashformations" show is former Providence arts coordinator Bob Rizzo. Rizzo, who ran the Parks Department's Office of Cultural Affairs for more than 15 years before retiring in 2004, is sending a trio of totem-like figures he calls The Spirits.

Though based on traditional African sculptures, The Spirits have a distinctively contemporary feel, being decorated with everything from old garden tools to discarded pieces of costume jewelry.

"I've been working on these guys for five or six years now," he says. "Every time I find something I really like, whether it's a feather, a piece of glass or a toy that some kid has thrown away, I come back and ask myself, 'Does it fit? Is there a place for it?'"

In all, "Trashformations" will feature the work of five Rhode Islanders. In addition to Bally and Rizzo, the show includes a "quilt" made of cut-up calendars by Saunderstown artist Michelle Leavitt, a "lamp" made of plumbing parts by RISD furniture-maker Tucker Houlihan and P.T.A., a playful folk-art assemblage by Providence artist John Marcoux.

Over the past few weeks, I had a chance to talk to all five artists about working methods and creative processes. Here's a look at how each turns other people's trash into artistic gold.

Boris Bally

Before earning a BFA at Carnegie Mellon, Bally spent two years as a goldsmith-in-training in Basel, Switzerland. So why give up gold for the more mundane, and decidedly less glamorous, medium of old traffic signs?

"At a certain point, I realized that traffic signs, like most pieces of public signage, are beautiful pieces of design," he says. "I mean, what could be more eye-catching than the word 'STOP' written in blocky white letters on a field of bright fire-engine red? And the shapes -- everything from triangles to octagons -- are wonderful to work with."

Since that automotive epiphany, Bally, 44, has earned a reputation as one of the country's most creative metalsmiths. He's a two-time fellowship winner from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, and his work is included in numerous collections, including those of New York's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, the American Craft Museum and London's Victoria and Albert Museum.

Now Bally uses his collection of cast-off street and traffic signs -- all, he says, obtained legally from various state transportation agencies -- to create boldly patterned bowls, platters, trays and even furniture.

"One of the great things about traffic signs is that they're really made to last," he says. "As long as they're properly glued or riveted together, they're practically indestructible."

As for his work with recycled guns, Bally sees it as part of a larger social mission.

"At first I wondered what I was doing with these things, which, after all, are basically designed to kill people," he says. "But then I started thinking about the old Native American idea that the best way to confront something that scares you is make something out of it."

Bob Rizzo

As director of Providence's Office of Cultural Affairs, Bob Rizzo spent more than 15 years promoting the work of local artists. Then, in 2002, Rizzo was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy, a disease in which a weakened heart slowly chokes off the body's blood-oxygen supply.

"Basically, I couldn't breathe," he says. "It felt like somebody very big was standing on my chest and wouldn't get off."

Eventually, Rizzo's condition stabilized. But by then Providence had a new mayor with plans to merge the Office of Cultural Affairs into a new cabinet-level arts and tourism department.

Rizzo decided to take stock.

"When I thought about it, I realized that I'd really accomplished all the things I wanted to do," he says. "And I was really tired of all the meetings and the 70-hour weeks. Ultimately, I decided it was time to stop doing stuff for other people and start doing stuff for myself."

That meant spending more time on his work, which mixes influences from African sculpture to American folk art.

"I've always been interested in African art," he says. "For one thing, it reflects a very different way of looking at the world. In Africa, they make art out of whatever happens to be around -- wood, stone, grass, bits of metal. We, on the other hand, just throw everything out."

To make his sculptures, Rizzo often starts with a frame made from old furniture parts. Then he dips into his stock of scavenged and recycled materials and starts decorating.

The list of objects attached to his Spirit sculptures, for examples, includes everything from an old ox harness to the little tin buttons issued to art lovers as they enter a museum.

"The great thing is that people really respond to this stuff," he says. "They look at all the junk and they say, 'Hey, I used to have one of those. How did you get it to look so good?'"

Michelle Leavitt

Michelle Leavitt first learned about sewing and quilting from her mother, an Indiana native who grew up during the Great Depression. Since then, she's moved beyond traditional quilting to embrace various forms of fiber and installation art.

But in at least one area, Leavitt has stayed true to her frugal Midwestern roots: As much as possible, she tries to work with materials that have passed through other hands before hers.

"Sometimes I wonder what my mother would say about some of my more unconventional pieces," Leavitt says with a laugh. "But I know she'd respect the fact that I work with a lot of recycled materials. I mean, this was a woman who never threw anything away."

Leavitt, 54, is especially well known for her innovative quilts, which incorporate everything from torn blue jeans to recycled shopping bags to old magazine covers. Often the pieces are embellished with poems, sayings and political observations, some of which Leavitt writes herself and some of which she culls from her favorite authors.

Leavitt's contribution to the Fuller exhibit, a big quilt-like collage called Soldier, is typical of her work.

From a distance, the bright colors and jagged geometric shapes suggest a contemporary painting. But as you

get closer, you notice that the work is actually composed of hundreds of old calendar illustrations, all neatly cut and pasted into a kind of crazy-quilt pattern.

"They're all art calendars," says Leavitt, who spent nearly two months on the project. "When my friends found out I was doing collages, they started sending me all their old calendars. If you look closely, you'll see paintings by Van Gogh, Monet and the other Impressionists."

You'll also notice that the pieces of paper spell out the words to a poem.

"Basically, it's about the terrible price people pay during wartime, including the soldiers who are actually doing the fighting," says Leavitt. "I wrote the poem during the war in Bosnia, before the whole Iraq thing happened. But I think it applies equally well to that situation."

John Marcoux

Though best known as a furniture-maker, Providence's John Marcoux is really more of a master-tinkerer -- an artist who can take anything from tree branches to coffee cans and turn them into art.

"I've always loved making things with my hands," Marcoux says. "Basically, if I don't have a project to work on I'm miserable."

Typical of Marcoux's witty yet perfectly crafted work are his "yardstick tables" -- so-called because they're made from dozens of hardwood yardsticks. The tables have become so popular that other artists have started paying Marcoux the ultimate compliment: they've begun copying them.

"You see a lot of stuff like that nowadays," says Marcoux, 82. "That's one reason I started doing other things."

Lately, Marcoux's material of choice has been metal. Specifically, he's started using old metal cans and containers, which he carefully cuts up, then fashions into elaborate sculptural tableaux.

"The labels, the colors, even the typography is really quite wonderful," he says.

For P.T.A., the work that will represent him in the "Trashformations" show, Marcoux created a Lilliputian-size school auditorium, complete with chairs, stage, curtains, even flags.

"It was a challenge," he says. "I wanted to see how many different shapes and textures I could pack into a single piece."

Tucker Houlihan

You might say Tucker Houlihan has gone from chemistry to alchemy. Ten years ago, Houlihan was a professional chemist working for an Idaho company that cleaned up industrial waste sites.

"It was pretty nasty work," he says. "Contrary to what you might think, we didn't sit around in white lab coats sipping coffee and peering through test tubes. We actually had to get out and slog around these places, some of which were pretty darned awful."

Eventually, Houlihan decided to go back to school. On a whim, he signed up for a course in furniture-making.

"That was it," he says. "I was hooked."

Since then, Houlihan has earned a master's degree from the Rhode Island School of Design, which boasts one of the nation's top-ranked furniture programs. He currently teaches part-time at RISD, where he also oversees

the school's woodworking shop.

Like Marcoux, Houlihan combines a playful sense of humor with a tinkerer's fascination for how things work. Those qualities are apparent in Flush Light, a table lamp made almost entirely from home-plumbing supplies, including a toilet top (for the base), a plunger (the stand) and a toilet float (the shade).

"My father used to do a lot of plumbing work when I was a kid," Houlihan says. "In a way, I guess this is sort of an homage to him."

"Trashformations East" runs from Saturday through May 1 at the Fuller Craft Museum, 455 Oak St. in Brockton, Mass. Hours: Mon.-Sun., 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Admission: adults \$5, students and seniors \$3, free for members and children under 12. Phone: (508) 588-6000. Web: [www.fullercraft.org](http://www.fullercraft.org).