

THE TEMPLE MOUNTED - Newport Mercury, June 11, 2008 - BY
LISA UTMAN RANDALL

BOB RIZZO, Artist

This Providence born, self-taught artist and arts advocate has led an active and very public life in the arts. Best known as the creator of the Convergence International Arts Festival, where he served as curator from 1988 to 2003, Rizzo is the recipient of numerous grants and awards including The Rhode Island Tourism Achievement Award, and was chosen as a Rhode Island Foundation Fellow in 2003 through his role as executive director of CapitolArts. His exhibit opening June 13 at the Newport Art Museum, "Bob Rizzo : Shrines, Icons and Spirits," is a multicultural exploration of Rizzo 's fascination with tribal art, worship and rituals. The artist and his wife Karen live in Warwick where Rizzo makes art in studio spaces set up in his home.

When did you first realize that you were an artist?

I was always making things - and always getting in trouble for it! I wasn't a very good student. I just didn't like studying. My dad was an engineer and I grew up always putting things together and then taking them apart. I'm still doing it all these years later. It was around high school that I decided that's what I was going to do. At that point - it was around 1969 - I was making a lot of leather clothing. I had a little clothing business going.

I'm imagining lots of fringe!

Oh, yeah I made jackets with horrendous fringe - all the way down to the floor. I made costumes for musicians and I also sold clothes in boutiques on Newbury Street in Boston. I would take the bus up to South Station and then walk around collecting orders from stores. In those days I could go directly to the shop owners. Then I would go back to South Station where there were places that sold leather. So, I'd buy the leather I needed and go home to make the stuff. It was a hoot.

Your first exhibit was in 1975 at the "American Painters in Paris Exhibition."

How did you end up in France?

I had been drafted into the Army and had spent two years stationed in Germany and I just really wanted to get back to Europe. Being an artist there actually carried some weight. So I found an American school that

would take the GI Bill and got a scholarship, too. I studied mostly painting and just happened to be around for the show in Paris. After nine months, though, I ran out of money and realized that I was more interested in making work than being a student.

In 1975 you also created your first performance/ installation piece "Branch Prop," what drove your interest in performance art and installations?

I don't think I ever really had a specific medium. I've always done a lot of different things, but the simple answer is lack of money. I just didn't have the money to buy materials. I lived near a huge park and spent a lot of time in the woods; I realized that I had free materials just falling out of the trees. Rope was cheap, so I came up with an idea to use rope and branches. I would go into the woods, grab tree branches and drag them to the spot where I would build a structure. Then I would pick up the whole piece and move it 30 paces ahead. I'd go back to the original site and build another one and then move that one and I continued until it was about a mile long. Half way through the project someone stole all my structures. I was in the middle of taking a French test and someone came in and told me that my sculptures were all gone. I never found out what happened, maybe a farmer used them for firewood, but I had already announced the piece, so I had to rebuild.

Why did you build each sculpture in the same spot and then move them? It seems like a lot of extra work.

Going back to that spot to construct each piece was part of the process. The process is what's most important. I've always found it so much more interesting. With "Branch Prop" the sculptures ended in front of a chateau and I had a jazz band play music. It was great. I did another version in 2002 for an Island Moving Co. performance at Ballard Park.

One of the things you're most well known for is your role as creator and curator of the Convergence International Art Festival that you founded in 1988.

What led you to create this festival?

I did it because there was no place to show sculptures. I had earlier done some site-specific work at Roger Williams Park, which is an amazing 430-acre space. In the beginning it was just me, I would put out a call for proposals and initially it was mostly a lot of local folks. The money came

from the Parks Department and the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts.

Were you immediately successful?

Oh, God no. It took years for people to even be able to pronounce the name! It was the performance art, music and theater that I always included that started drawing the audience, and then they would find the work. People would get a guide to all the sculptures and they could walk around and see them. The festival kept growing in scope and by 1996, I knew we had to bring it downtown where it really jumped. But there was never much support financially; it was kind of hard to explain to bankers. And then, after 2001, it became really difficult to raise money, we ended up in competition with 9/11 stuff. So, that's why it eventually died, but when it was going, I was working 60 to 70 hours a week. By then I had started CapitolArts, my nonprofit, as a way to raise money for Convergence.

So, how did you keep it going for so long?

I was incredibly busy but most of the time I wasn't thinking, just doing. And I was really enjoying it for the most part, but you can only beat yourself on the head so many times. I ended up with a heart condition because of all the stress and it has taken me quite a few years to feel OK. I'm much better now; I spend a lot more time in the garden! But this is the only way things change. Individuals have to do it.

Your exhibit at the Newport Art Museum is called "Shrines, Icons and Spirits"; what has inspired your current interest in tribal art?

It's something I've always been interested in. Even as a kid my parents took us to pow-wows from very early on. I recently found some of my old books on Indian arts and crafts that I had gotten autographed when I was a kid - I was kind of an Indian-geek. I've always been interested in how people communicate with the unknown. Through my travels in Greece, which gave me the initial inspiration for some of my taller figures, I saw lots of roadside shrines. That got me really thinking about all this. Simultaneously, I've collected African objects. So, for this exhibit I'm trying to really mix up all that stuff into this new body of work. Some of the pieces have taken up to eight years to make because I keep adding to them.

Beads, coins, porcupine quills, shells, buffalo fur and animal bones are just some of the items that have gone into your art. Where

do you get these things?

A lot of the stuff I find in the street or people give to me. I've had to resort to eBay to get some of the skulls. I really like the idea of mixing this all together, especially these days when religion is so completely out of control. We're all hoping for a better afterlife and we're not convinced that we're in control of our own destiny.