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ART & DESIGN

In Queens, a Battle on the Low Seas, and May the Best Artist Win

By LIBBY NELSON AUG. 14, 2009

Sated with free beer and wine, and plenty of it, the toga-wearing crowd flung microwaved tomatoes and morsels of baguette into the reflecting pool at Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Queens.

“Boats!” they yelled. “Boats! Boats! Boats!”

This was an art exhibition — a term that perhaps conjures a more subdued event. But the art in this show, called “Those About to Die Salute You,” involved humans in motion, boats on water and those tomatoes. It was the creation of Duke Riley, whose work skews aquatic and unpredictable: He once built a wood and fiberglass submarine, floated it too close to the Queen Mary 2 and was arrested.

His vision for Queens on Thursday night was a Roman-style staged naval battle among representatives of museums in four New York boroughs, who would face off in teams in the reflecting pool, paddling in boats built from recycled materials like reeds and salvaged Styrofoam.

At least, that was the general idea. There were no dress rehearsals; there was no script.

“It’s one of these things where you’re taking a certain degree of risk,” said Tom Finkelpearl, executive director of the Queens Museum of Art. Mr. Riley, sneaking

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“There’s a lot of variables and wild cards,” he added. “I just hope everything goes smoothly and safely, and nobody gets too badly hurt.” In the end it was a sopping melee, very messy, and any notions of careful naval strategies were quickly abandoned as the audience and the team members — dressed in cardboard armor with painted faces and cardboard swords and shields — got caught up in their enthusiasm. But it was art. And nobody got too badly hurt.

The idea evolved over the course of a year, Mr. Riley said. He had been thinking for some time about naumachia, as ancient Rome’s elaborate re-enactments of naval battles were called. When he was asked to do an exhibition for the Queens Museum of Art, which hosted the event, “everything just kind of clicked,” he said.

By Thursday afternoon, the reflecting pool was filled with 70,000 gallons of water for what organizers said was the first time since the 1964 World’s Fair. The teams, from the Queens Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Bronx Museum of the Arts and El Museo del Barrio in Manhattan, were putting on their war paint and cardboard armor. A Queens Museum intern had spent the day microwaving tomatoes, seeking to achieve the perfect consistency for throwing.

And by early evening toga-wearing guests were packed into the museum, shouting at one another to be heard over a rock band playing behind them. Eventually spectators moved out to the reflecting pool, sitting quietly at first, on the grass and on bleachers.

As the wait stretched to an hour, they grew restless. The microwaved tomatoes, piled in boxes by the pool, were meant to be thrown during the mock battle, but they proved too much of a temptation. Soon people were flinging them across the pool at one another. A few unfurled umbrellas to protect themselves.

Then the audience began jumping into the thigh-deep pool as the first boat, the one from the Queens Museum of Art, emerged. An announcer grabbed the microphone: “Let’s get it started!” he said.

But that ship, as they say, had sailed.

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“Get out of the pool!” the announcer yelled, trying to restore order and using several expletives. “Get out of the water! We’re not starting till you’re out of the pool!”

The audience complied, and the ensuing battle resulted in the disintegration of most of the boats within 20 minutes. Audience members refused to stay corralled and jumped back into the water and climbed onto the boats. The Queens boat collapsed, as did the Brooklyn one, meant to be a battleship. Only a giant pig-shaped boat made of wood, representing Manhattan, emerged mostly unscathed.

A model of the Queen Mary 2, Mr. Riley’s old target, was the last to arrive, pushed by a volunteer, and was promptly set aflame, driving spectators from the water. Then Roman candles began issuing from the boat, followed by other fireworks. Some burst overhead; others landed a little too close, and the crowd ducked. The flames reached almost three feet high before the boat was tipped into the water and the fire extinguished.

“You never really know what’s going to happen,” Mr. Riley said after the performance. “Nobody got hurt, and I’m not in jail.”

Afterward the spectators appeared exhilarated but slightly shell shocked. Some praised the participatory nature of the art; others were still recovering.

“It was radical, super radical,” said Catherine Harine Connell of Brooklyn. “The fact that it was in a public park in Queens.

“It was free form, but still organized,” she added.

Ms. Connell was euphoric; others were alarmed.

“That was wilder than I ever would have expected,” said Dorothy Trojanowski, who described the event as “out of control.”

“The danger factor was — ” she paused. “Stimulating.”

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Some wondered, given the night's events so far, whether he might have been serious.

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