

Local Artist Builds Westernized Toguna

Informing and entertaining is a newspaper's main purpose. Unfortunately, a print newspaper loses its relevance with the next day's issue – or next week's issue for the Broadside – where more recent news is found. Competing with the emergence of online news outlets and citizen journalism with up-to-the-minute breaking news, like Mason's newest media convergence site, Connect Mason, print newspapers are searching for more ways to be useful.

Before tossing an old newspaper in the recycling bin, consider the many different ways newspapers are all ready useful in daily life. We use newspapers for gift-wrapping, shredded for packing material, as fridge vegetable drawer liners, puppy training pads, a floor protector during paint jobs, making paper-mâché crafts and – thatching a roof?

Local artist Reuben Breslar did just that. Breslar came to the Student Media office on the Fairfax campus in January requesting any unused copies of the Broadside. Using the Broadside and a mix-match of several other local newspapers' recycled copies, he was able to create the thatched roof of his contemporary art piece.

The installation Breslar created is what he called “a Westernized version” of a West African meeting house called a *toguna*. Some of his inspiration came from childhood memories in Mali, because he saw these structures when he was young, growing up overseas. The *toguna*, native to Mali in every Dogon village, is the central meeting place for the men to discuss important matters. The structure is made of wood and built short to encourage peaceful talks and resolve differences, making no room to stand up and argue.

-- MORE --

Breslar used copper tubing instead of wood as the base posts of the structure. Copper is a huge Western commodity and building material, so it adds to the meaning of the piece, he said. In addition, a lot of wire is wrapped around the structure, making it difficult to enter.

“It’s not something you can naturally access, because the structure was so unfound, which was part intentional, that it would have collapsed,” said Breslar.

One of his biggest challenges, separate from actually building the art installation, was finding venues willing to give him unused newspapers. The bulk of the newspapers he collected were from people in his neighborhood who recycle. In total, the newspapers he collected filled the entire back seat and trunk area of his four-door hatchback.

“I couldn’t find any recycling plant within a 25-mile radius of my house that would just allow me to come and pick up 300 pounds of newspapers,” Breslar said.

Why use newspapers, then? Breslar said he tries to be “green,” recycling and using raw materials. This can be difficult as an artist, with toxic materials like oil paints, solvents and thinners. But there’s another reason he used newspapers: to show the weight of the media – literally. The installation is very top heavy to “idealize the heaviness of the western politics, economics, and agriculture,” he said.

An art preparator with a Bachelor of Fines Arts from the Corcoran College of Art & Design, Breslar hopes one day to be teaching and continuing his art. His installation, paintings and collages are part of Black/White, his exhibit at the Athenaeum, a non-profit art gallery in Old Town, Alexandria. Black/White runs from Saturday, February 9 through Saturday, March 16.