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ART & DESIGN

Creative Hubris, as Ephemeral as Sea Foam

By MELENA RYZIK AUG. 19, 2012



The gold-prize winners were Jennifer Catron and Paul Outlaw, artistic and romantic partners whose work is often interactive and concerned with community, sustenance and fun.

Credit: Michael Appleton for The New York Times

to resemble pins. "Bowl cuts," a sign announced jauntily. The wink was implied.

Along with more than a dozen other swimsuit-clad artists, Mr. Yellin was selected to participate in the inaugural sand castle building contest organized by Creative Time, the public arts organization. For several hours, as a crowd grew on the Boardwalk, the artists dug and piled and smoothed, making pieces from conceptual to representative and building mostly with sand and water. It wasn't quite the Biennale, but this showdown did have some bragging rights. Prizes were awarded after the three-hour competition, and there was the judgment of beachgoers. ("Should we bet on this?" one man asked his friends.)

The contest first came to Creative Time as an idea for Art Basel Miami Beach. But then, said Anne Pasternak, the president and artistic director of Creative Time, the organization realized that sand and surf were equally accessible in the Rockaways, where a sand-castle competition seemed like a no-brainer. "I thought, 'Why hasn't anybody done this already?'" she said, standing on the Boardwalk afterward. David Selig, an owner of Rockaway Taco, helped secure permits for the contest and the burger joint Rippers for an after-party, and Creative Time put the call out to artists, who were so eager to participate that Ms. Pasternak thought it might become an annual event.

In the annals of things that have turned up on the shore in Rockaway Beach in Queens, haircuts and bowling are probably not unheard-of. But rarely are they as artistically minded as what Dustin Yellin prepared.

With a few helpers Mr. Yellin, a Brooklyn artist, dug adjoining trenches on a stretch of sand on Friday afternoon at Beach 86th Street. In one, decorated with an assortment of fashions images, a guy with a shaggy hairdo snipped willing participants: beach-front beauty salon. In the next trench kids rolled a ball at a half-dozen two-liter soda bottles, painted white

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"We like to poke fun at ourselves, and this is about as ephemeral as art can be," she said, looking out over the sculptures, which were to be stomped or filled in by nightfall.

But many of the artists took the task seriously. William Lamson, whose work often involves the environment, spent a week refining his design, which was inspired by a gravel cylinder he saw in a Japanese temple. His towering cone of sand came out perfectly, and for good reason: He did a trial run on the beach a few days before. When that five-foot template collapsed, Mr. Lamson, in a panic, called for expert advice.

"I just Googled 'sand castle makers,'" he said. The pros he contacted were a bit confused by his project. "They make, like, Jeeps," Mr. Lamson said. "They do stuff in malls." But their advice, to use more water, held.

On competition day there were close calls but no major meltdowns, as a bare-chested man with a red visor and a megaphone, a swipe of sunscreen on his nose, provided color commentary.

"Dear God, what do I see before me?" he said as he strolled the roped-off competition area. "The Colosseum, with strange Devo hats surrounding it." The artist at work, Marie Lorenz, cracked up. She was inspired by the Roman Colosseum, she said, because it seemed safer to start with a ruin. She and her friends wore togas for the judging.

A few feet away members of the art-architecture group Snarkitecture followed a printed schematic as they built a giant pile of sand — the biggest pile, they hoped — and carefully inserted clear plastic tubes through it. Their aim was to be able to see through the sand. It worked, or at least it was fun to try.

Kenya Robinson dug a pit and plopped herself and two friends in it, where they painstakingly wove strings around themselves, a beach game of cat's cradle. Ms. Robinson explained that the piece was called "Female Prostate."

"I like holes and string," she said.



Ms. Ryzik writes: "Their piece was a living, multilevel water fountain. A few friends were partially buried at its base; in red-white-and-blue swimsuits and bathing caps, they and the couple, perched on platforms with jugs of water and straws, took turns spouting and spitting — on one another, on passers-by and on the judges." Credit: Michael Appleton for The New York Times

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"Who doesn't?" the color commentator replied. He was Nato Thompson, chief curator of Creative Time. As a narrator he had the timing and vocabulary of an art-world Zach Galifianakis. "Who is this squat, enigmatic figure in front of me, whose face looks like a" bottom? he said, peering at an Aztec-ish sculpture by Laura Wasseerson and Amit Greenberg. "Um. Good job? It's moving along."

Nearby some kids did their own digging, inspired by Tom Sachs's installation: a deep pit beneath a hand-painted sign that read "China," with an arrow pointing down. But they were also minicritics: they summarily suggested that Mr. Sachs, the hardware-loving artist, was cheating by using a pump to vacuum water out of his pit.

Mr. Sachs scoffed at this notion. "What do you mean, 'fair'?" he asked, as he fiddled with an attachment for his hose. "It wasn't a rule. Why you got to be like that?"

There were no rules, and no criteria for determining winners, although whimsy, technique and public response all played a part. Ryan McNamara was judged first, because his installation — in which two people were immobilized by wooden boards and pounds of sand — seemed to be rapidly endangering the health of his volunteers.

"Would you like to say anything about the piece?" Mr. Thompson asked.

"That I have really amazing friends," Mr. McNamara replied.

After touring the 13 works and deliberating under a tent, the judges were ready to award prizes — bronze-, silver- and gold-colored shovels, along with celebratory bottles of tequila. (The judges, representatives of Creative Time and their friends, like the artist Duke Riley, had spent the afternoon carrying red canteens that read, 'Save Water — Drink Beer,' and it's safe to say they did their part in the conservation effort.)

Third place went to Jen DeNike, for a realistic sculpture of a reclining woman, her hand outstretched to touch an elegant sand castle; Ms. DeNike explained that it had come to her in a dream. Mr. Lamson took second place for his cone sculpture and said he could imagine building it again, though in a different medium.

And the gold-prize winners were Jennifer Catron and Paul Outlaw, artistic and romantic partners whose work is often interactive and concerned with community, sustenance and fun. Their piece was a living, multitiered water fountain. A few friends were partially buried at its base; in red-white-and-blue swimsuits and bathing caps, they and the couple, perched on platforms with jugs of water and straws, took turns spouting and spitting — on one another, on passers-by and on the judges.

"You don't want to make a serious sand sculpture," Ms. Catron said at the after-party.

But the couple did make an effort. They practiced spitting at each other at home.

"Which is how we knew to bring swim caps," Mr. Outlaw said.