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Sculptor Wayne Zebzda Talks to yoU on Process, Creativity and Inspiratio

by Anne E. O'Malley

I'm having coffee and sculpture with artist Wayne Zebzda, sitting on a stool he made from a recycled fire bell that once had a higher calling—saving lives—at the old Lihue Theatre. In front of us, resting on the lawn outside his Oma`o studio, is a chunky 11-1/2-foot high, 18-foot wide, curved, brushed aluminum sculpture titled Talk to mE. It's destined for a new home on the Kalaheo School campus.

Sunlight flits through a partially cloudy sky, allowing a second sculpture of light and shadow to intermittently appear on the grass under the curved metal. Occasionally, I catch a glimpse of critters teased out of the metal tangle—a fish, a centipede and other naif shapes.

This is the opus that Zebzda, a former guerrilla artist on the streets of San Francisco, created through the artist-in-residence program at Kalaheo Elementary School. It's a competitive, state-funded program in which artists work with kids to develop a project that beautifies the campus.

After being selected, Zebzda worked closely with a student-teacher-parent team to get ideas flowing. Then it was time to get down to brass—er—aluminum tacks with Kalaheo fourth and fifth graders and get their creative juices flowing.

How do you involve kids in creating something from point zero? Where do you begin? The answer was astonishingly simple.

"We started studying how to think abstractly," says Zebzda.

"I drew a simple check mark on the board and I said, OK, what is this?"

They got it pronto. "A check mark," they called out.

Then Zebzda said, "On your sneaker."

The students chorused back, "Nike!"

Before long, kids were drawing symbols to represent emotions, themselves, and more. Abstraction had gone from concept to implementation.

"The important thing was just starting, and making a mark on a piece of paper," says Zebzda, who worked with over 100 students in a variety of classes. "That's the beginning of exchanging ideas." Zebzda links those first marks the Kalaheo students made to some of the earliest communications in the history of humankind.

"It goes way back to scratching on a cave wall, communicating 'Here's a bison, here's the hunt,' or drawing a map, a location, creating symbols of where you exist in the world," he says. "But the most important thing is, it's a start, and I wanted to show the kids how they can start with just a simple drawing and it blossoms into this thing where it's sort of like, your dreams come true, in a sense. All you have to do is think it and dream it and there's a good chance it can come true."

Students took abstract and concept and ran with it, generating tons of drawings. One fifth grader in particular caught Zebzda's eye.

"He was like a logo factory. He was amazing! They could have signed him up with an ad agency today." Teachers wanted the sculpture to be a bit like a time capsule, says Zebzda. One of the symbols is a Poke ball—tying in the Pokemon craze.

Other symbols represent a fish with stripes, a person standing on her head, a chicken, and of course, the ubiquitous centipede.

One of the symbols looks like Saturn--or it could be a spaceship, says Zebzda. Along the way he misplaced the drawing of it, later found it and realized it was in fact a shaka, with two fingers coming out from a round circle. Now there were three meanings represented by the same symbol.

"Everything's open to interpretation," says Zebzda. "If it weren't, there'd only be one lawyer, you know?"

“The kids can make one thing and see how it’s viewed differently. They can see that no matter how precise or clear you try and create something, somebody’s always going to have a different viewpoint of it. But that’s life. That’s what makes the world so interesting.”

Once the teaching portion was finished, Zebzda whisked through the drawings, laying them out in a stream-of-consciousness mode.

“Without thinking, ‘I’m going to place this one next to that and tell a story,’ I just made it a big collage of communication, like the Tower of Babel,” he says.

Later, as he bent the sculpture into a large curve, its shape would suggest a play on words. He began calling it, tongue-in-cheek, the Tiara of Babble.

With the collage of papers in front of him, and clad in his long-sleeved navy blue T-shirt, grungy brown pants and soft boots, he went to work.

“This is my working uniform,” he says. “Steel and metal is always just so oily, your clothes are shot.”

With safety tools, metal benders and welding gun at hand, he began. It wasn’t all smooth sailing.

“Pipes were breaking,” he says. “The tubing was fracturing, so I had to really change the course of how I was working with it.

“You’re continually making aesthetic decisions, calculations and judgments. A lot of the pipe I had was too small. I didn’t use any of it because it just looked wimpy.”

Zebzda switched to thicker piping, something he felt looked more chunky and childlike. Delivery trucks learned Zebzda’s address by heart, which led to an unexpected side benefit.

As Zebzda says, “One thing about doing things with public art is that it exposes a lot of people who normally wouldn’t be involved, in the process of art making.”

For example, there’s the backhoe driver who will dig the holes where the sculpture’s base will stand.

“And in the past I’ve hired cranes, and concrete trucks come, and they all start inquiring about just what this is about and the art education process begins.”

The process that began with selection and meetings some time in Fall 2000; that ran through rigorous State Foundation on Culture and the Arts and Department of Education checklists; that met stringent engineering conditions; and that brought into kids’ lives how to dream art and make it a reality--was finally completed by the end of Summer 2002.

The kids supplied the symbols, but before even that step could take place, there had to be some glimmering, some idea forming about how, exactly, this body of work might look when finished. Was it going to be tall? Squat? Round? What?

Says Zebzda, “You take in all the environmental factors and of course, the context of the school. I treated it as a formal sculpture--the shape, form and size, texture, color--all those things that you work with whether you’re carving a rock abstractly or you’re doing something conceptually.

“I think in terms of volumes and shape and size, position, where it would be. I gave them different scenarios involving the symbols, how they could be stacked up like two towers at one spot, flanking the school entry—we ran through a couple of different ideas and they selected this one.

Before even the glimmering comes, there’s got to be trust that the inspiration will be there. How does that part work for Zebzda?

“Oh, I’m cursed!” he says. “I’ve been making art since I was five, drawing like crazy.

“I was an insanely shy kid, so the art was a way to express myself without having to do it verbally. I could do it in two dimensional drawings, paintings and things.”

A New Englander by birth, Zebzda entered San Francisco Art Institute, where, on the basis of his painting, he would earn a merit scholarship for his final two years and find his meter of the moment—street art.

There was Z National Park on Columbus Avenue, a mock national park replete with a ranger and an information box with pamphlets. It was prompted by his love of nature and a lone tree on a traffic island.

James Watts was secretary of the interior at the time, and selling out parklands for natural resources. When a video of Zebzda's installation appeared on television, the Democratic National Convention asked to use it.

Zebzda missed the New England winters, so snowmen of plaster, sticks and coal popped up on access roads and bridges, like some kind of overweight militia. Later, they were kidnapped.

He participated in Chicago's famous outdoor shows, installing in one of them A Very Public Shower that consisted of a copper ball float normally found in a toilet tank, hooked to a hydrant and tall enough that Chicago Bulls could use it.

"It had a pull handle and homeless were washing up in it," he says.

On the Nature of Security was born of the street and skid row, where his truck was broken into 13 times in three years. But that was where an artist could afford digs.

If he were to go to the streets again and revive his guerrilla art on Kaua'i, what might it look like?

"Guerrilla topiary," he says.

San Francisco was also the place where his love of film-making began, but the expense of it was off the charts.

"Everybody would be driving cab, waiting to get enough money to get their film out of hock from Leo Dyner films in San Francisco," says Zebzda. "You had all these films on the shelf—work prints—until you could get up the money."

Zebzda now does video. It goes hand-in-hand with sculpture and is much more affordable than film, he says. So he was completely at home when Kalaheo students, as part of the artist-in-residence program, came to his studio to interview him on video. After editing, it will go on a website.

Zebzda challenged and inspired many students during this project. Who, in turn, inspires him?

"Different artists—Gordon Matta Clark, Bruce Nauman, Joseph Beuys, Brancusi, and of course Marcell Duchamp, Anselm Kiefer—he took my breath away on a trip to Berlin--Jackson Pollack, Ryder and Kline, Richard Serra's work, sculptors such as Claes Oldenburg."

Given a vacation, it's no contest. He heads to New York, to galleries that continue to nurture and inspire him.

"I love seeing really good art," he says. "It just energizes me."

To see some really good art yourself, visit Wayne Zebzda's website at <http://www.waynz.com>.