

arts



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J.P. MOCZULSKI FOR NATIONAL POST

Bruno Billio in Toronto, before his Reverse Pedagogy collective set sail for Venice.

THREAD BEARER

Why Bruno Billio is wrapping Venice in string

BY KATHERINE LAIDLAW

Fifteen years ago, Bruno Billio stumbled upon a spool of red thread on Venice's cobblestone streets. Lying discarded on a sidewalk, Billio snatched it up and scampered around the city by night, wrapping door handles, columns and palaces with tightly wound spirals of thread.

Last week Billio brought his guerrilla-style art back to Venice, entwining the city once again with coils of fuchsia thread.

This time, the thirtysomething artist arrived by gilded silver canoe with 21 other artists in tow as part of the hodgepodge artist collective called Reverse Pedagogy. The nomadic art residency, first founded by Paul Butler at the Banff Centre last year and now under the guidance of Toronto-based artist Dean Baldwin, descended on Venice last Wednesday for the 53rd Venice Biennale.

The merry band of artists, from vastly different disciplines and predominantly Canadian, had planned to canoe into the city and pitch tents in Palazzo Zen, a 16th-century art installation. They'll set up camp (literally) for two weeks as they unleash spontaneous works of art on the city and show Venice what it means to be Canadian.

To Billio, that means a tall silver teepee crowned with twirling Queen Anne legs instead of any ordinary tent.

"I'll be pitching my teepee all over the city. Sometimes I'll just leave it and walk away," he said, adding that the tent is made of emergency blankets and his canoe and matching oars are coated in silver tape. Billio isn't shy about the kitschy qualities of the Canadiana he'll be displaying.

"They present a stereotype on the table and confront it," he said. "It's all silver, it's showing respect." He argues that he's being playful with a stereotype of Canadians embedded in the imaginations of those who don't live here. "They think of canoes and teepees and snow and skiing and cowboys and Indians," he said. "It's almost fantastical. And it goes both ways — we stereotype [other countries], too."

Along with the collective's grand entrance and planned activities such as staging a tug of war across the Grand Canal and hosting a pancake breakfast, Billio will reprise his bound-installation threadwork.

"It's a great way of occupying space and using colour," he said. "It's a way of doing something in Venice and not upsetting anybody. It's unexpected and understandable, digestible. People don't look at string and

get upset." He won't know what the other members of the group are doing until they arrive and get settled, he says. And, even then, spontaneous collaborations may crop up between group members, including Jon Sasaki of last year's Nuit Blanche mascot fame, Kelly Mark and Paulette Phillips. "There's no right or wrong," Billio says. "Just do something!"

Baldwin agrees, adding that throwing artists together to experiment is part of the residency's purpose.

"It's seeing what happens when you stick everybody into a situation where they're not going to just be alone in a studio, and what that collective energy produces," Baldwin said.

And even after Billio and the Canadians come home, his scraps of thread will ensure Venice remembers him, at least for a while.

"For the city of Venice it wasn't graffiti. A lot of guerrilla art goes on there. The thread's so slight, so thin. Almost poetic in a way, like a laser beam," he said.

"Last time, threads were blowing in the wind, people had broken through them to get to different places. Bits and pieces are still there. It's something people still talk about."

Weekend Post
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POP TEN LIST

Father's Day is just over two weeks away and you have no idea how to celebrate the old man? How about an array of fine Mike Holmes products and recognition in his favourite newspaper? We're looking for Pop Ten Lists: Ten reasons why your father is uniquely the best. Make us laugh, make us envious or tug on our heartstrings, and we might publish your list on June 20, just in time to make his Father's Day. Plus, you'll be in the running for one of seven Mike Holmes prize packs. Enter online at nationalpost.com/dad by June 16. (You can read the rules here, too.)

Here's a sample entry from Brad Frenette, our online features editor:

10. My father is not shy to tell everyone how great he is at being humble.

9. He brought me out on Lake St. Clair to teach me to sail. The boat capsized, but he had me by the back of the life vest before we hit the water.

8. Now that I'm taller than he is, we don't see eye to eye all the time but I still look up to him.

7. He made sure his boyhood baseball glove made it from his youth to mine. And I made sure I had it when I tried out for the majors.

6. He can both take a punch and accept a hug. I've seen both.

5. In fact, I've offered both, but only ever got one in return.

4. I've never seen him drunk, I've never seen him ogle a woman and I've never seen him back down from a man.

3. He can get away with saying things like "real men eat meat" in a room full of vegetarians.

2. I once watched him stare down a wild rhino at a game reserve in South Africa. And I'll tell you this: That ungulate didn't even know what hit him.

1. After my wife and me, he was the first person to hold my daughter. He showed me how to do it.

Weekend Post

Senior citizens of cinema are finally acting their ages

65+ WITH NUANCE



CHRIS KNIGHT
On Movies

If you've ever tried to get the name of a movie from a vague description, you know it can be tricky. "The one where Denzel Washington plays a cop" doesn't narrow things down much. "The film with Tom Hanks as a bad guy" leaves you with precious little to choose from. Most weeks, the question: "What new film stars an old guy who takes a balloon ride?" would return at most one reply. Right now it gets you two.

Last week, Disney/Pixar took to the skies with *Up*, in which the curmudgeonly Carl Fredricksen (79-year-old Ed Asner) ties helium balloons to his house to lift it off the ground. Yesterday, *Up* was joined by the new release *Empties*, which also features an old man and a lighter-than-air journey. Granted, you'd never confuse the two past the opening credits. *Up* is computer-generated animation that requires the use of 3-D glasses; *Empties* is a live-action film from the Czech Republic, with English subtitles.

They are both, however, part of a groundswell of films that feature virile protagonists in their golden years. This week alone saw two more besides *Empties*. The best is the Norwegian comedy *O'Horten*, about a 67-year-old train engineer who finds himself in all manner of weird situations after his retirement.

Also opening this weekend is *My Life in Ruins*. Although it stars 46-year-old Nia Vardalos as an Athens tour guide, it also features Richard Dreyfuss as an ageing American tourist who steers her character away from a dalliance with a shallow pancake executive and toward the Greek love of her life, who has been patiently waiting to be noticed. Dreyfuss, as befits his sexy sexagenarian status, also gets some action from two love-starved Spanish divorcees. Yes, both at once. Apparently, in spite of what some movies would have us believe, 60 is the new 20.

Other recent cinematic elders include 72-year-old Red West as the suicidally grumpy old white guy in *Goodbye Solo*, and the cast of the German film *Cloud 9*, in which a sixty-something grandmother takes an older man as her lover. And don't forget Brad Pitt's Benjamin Button, who was born old and grew physically younger even as his wisdom and experience deepened.

Old people in the movies generally fall into one of two polar clichés: They're either saintly dispensers of the wisdom of the aged, or they're

swearing like sailors and riding skateboards. In contrast, the recent field of seniors shows some remarkable depth of character.

Up's Carl is unique in that he headlines a film aimed squarely at kids. My four-year-old, who saw the movie last weekend, thought it was funny when young Russell dropped a GPS out the window of the flying house, but he's had many more questions about what motivates "the guy with the glasses." Pixar hasn't previously had much use for old people (or, to be fair, any people) in most of its animated films; the only major character that springs to mind is Paul Newman's past-his-prime racer in *Cars*.

Carl not only anchors *Up*; he is the film's most relatable character for audiences of any age. It's true that he and Russell each learn something from the other (though it sounds glib to put it so starkly), but the old guy is also on his own path of discovery. After all, it takes gumption to pull up stakes and move to South America at such an advanced age, even if you do take your china cabinet, comfy chair and kitchen sink with you.

Other senior cinema citizens are equally, er, three-dimensional. Josef, the retired literature professor in *Empties*, spends half his time fantasizing about women and the other half naively trying to bring romantic happiness

Richard Dreyfuss clearly never met a line he couldn't punch

to others, even setting up his daughter, whose husband has just left her, with a former colleague who doesn't realize the two are related. To top it off, he surprises his wife with a trip in a hot-air balloon, a treat *Up*'s widower probably wishes he'd thought of doing while his spouse was still alive. Josef is clearly a man with a lusty appreciation of life, even if it does veer toward infidelity at times.

Old age in these movies brings with it a remarkable sense of buoyancy, metaphorical and otherwise. The engineer in *O'Horten* shows a calm bemusement through most of his adventures, which include an impromptu ski jump, while Dreyfuss in *My Life in Ruins* obviously never met a line he couldn't punch.

One of the top documentaries last year was about a seniors' choir that performs some rocking covers. The title was *Young @ Heart*, but to look at the elders on the screens these days is to see people who are old at heart, and pretty comfortable with it. Rather than suggest that old age is an impairment to be borne or, if possible, fixed, the current crop of films celebrates those who qualify for the seniors' discount, and gives the rest of us something to look forward to.

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MAPLE PICTURES

It's not quite as impressive as *Up*, but then *Empties* isn't a cartoon.