

Houston artists go green in a big way



By Nancy Wozny November 19, 2009

Making art out of plants holds a certain excitement for any green-leaning girl, so I just had to pop over to the <u>Art League of Houston</u> to see what Divya Murthy and <u>Nicola Parente</u> were up to with their living sculptures.

Parente and Murthy were off getting supplies, so I visited with Linda Phenix, former choreographer and now Art League's development director. During her dance-making years, Phenix, and her dance partner, Chris Lidvall, investigated Germany's deep ecology movement to create *Green Pieces* way back in 1991. Vintage dance fans remember that quirky Coke can dress and the bubble wrap bride.

"That Coke can dress was fabulous, but dangerous," recalls Phenix, who looks pleased to see Parente and Murthy taking up the cause.

I finally found Murthy and Parente unloading their art supplies for *Natural Recyclers and Wasted Resolve*, which in this case consisted of a 20 bags of dirt. The eco art team was finishing a set of giant mushroom sculptures that will soon be covered with native, non-native and edible plants. The stems will be covered with a moss milkshake (beer, sugar and moss in a blender).

"I like working with living media," says Murthy. Both hark from farming families, Parente in Mola di Bari, Italy and Murthy in Bangalore, India.

Natural Recyclers will be up for eight months, possibly longer, and will go through its own evolution.

"If the plants die, they die," Murthy insists. "That's the life cycle."



Giant mushrooms in Nicola Parente and Divya Murthy's outdoor installation, "Natural Recycler" Photo by Aaron Courtland



One of the three completed 10-foot-tall mushrooms in Nicola Parente and Divya Murthy's outdoor installation, "Natural Recycler" Photo by Nicola Parente

For *Wasted Resolve*, the gallery part of the show, they collected trash from an eight block radius around the Art League. "We are going to clean it up before we put it on the walls," Parente promises.

Motivated by a New York Times article citing Houston as the one of the worst recycling cities in the United States, the trash transforms into a graph on the gallery's walls. "It's concept and craft," says Murthy.

Both hope visitors leave the exhibit armed with more facts and become motivated to improve Houston's sorry recycling reputation.

Parente and Murthy have been on an eco art streak for a while, but after attending the <u>Systems of Sustainability: Art, Innovation, Action</u> (SOS) conference held at University of Houston, <u>Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts</u> last spring, their ideas began to solidify.

"SOS pushed us to take our ideas seriously," says Murthy.

Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center director Karen Farber is pleased that local artists are running with the SOS ball. "We managed to inspire a dialogue, which has gone on long after the event and

The Recycle Club
Photo by Karen Stokes



From "Wasted Resolve", the indoor gallery space exhibition by Nicola Parente and Divya Murthy Photo by Divya Murthy

exceeded my expectations," she says. "When we started talking about sustainability, we were making a commitment. We opened up the conversation, and it would be irresponsible of us as an institute to abandon the cause."

Farber also sees <u>Karyn Olivier's Inbound</u>, featuring billboards showing what we would see if they weren't there, as tied to her mission. Olivier's work invites questions of what we accept in our visual environment.

Farber continues on the green mission with the recent launch of "Live is Living" at <u>Discovery Green</u>. It entails a two-year residency of spoken word artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph, culminating in a performance work, *red*, *black and GREEN*, *a blues*.

Discovery Green's programming director Susanne Theis has been championing green art since Dan Phillips created the Recycled Gazebo with found objects, giving new life to materials the rest of us discard. And did you know the park's panels generate between nine and 25% of the power consumed and the remainder is from 100% renewable sources?

"We recycle, and provide the public with opportunities to bring their recycling here on Saturdays," Theis says.

Houston's greenest choreographer, <u>Travesty</u> director Karen Stokes, chose the sustainable park last season to show off her own designed for the great outdoors dance, *Green*. Following in Phenix's footsteps, Stokes has taken up the green mantle once again in her recent show, *The Recycle Club*, a combination concert, party and educational event. Stokes' approach encompasses recycling at every level, from the costumes to the dancers (old timers Farrell Dyde and Roberta Stokes). She even used her old choreography for the show.

Why make up new stuff when you have perfectly good old stuff?



Logo for Houston's SOS organization, Systems of Sustainability