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Crenshaw Stories:

Station Art Project Morphs Into 'Opera'

Artist Buzz Spector teams with musician to present stage version of stories at Cornell University

By JIMMY STROUP

> Multimedia artist Buzz Spector created "Crenshaw Stories" in 1995 to adorn the walls of the Metro Green Line Crenshaw station. The project featured more than 5,000 multi-colored tiles and more than 100 statements of Crenshaw residents who recount their memories of the area and of its history.



If the Walls Could Talk...



Artist Buzz Spector collected the following statements, among many others, from local residents and set them into the tiles that grace the Metro Green Line Crenshaw station walls. Spector's

(Oct. 19, 2007) When multimedia artist Buzz Spector finished the "Crenshaw Stories" piece he was commissioned to create for the Metro Green Line Crenshaw station in 1995, he thought he was through with the project. Little did he know how connected he would stay to that particular piece of art.

"Since I said goodbye to Southern California, people keep getting interested in it," he said. "It's showed up in films, you know. And now it's being examined by my friends and colleagues at Cornell as an example of community and activist public art practice."

Spector began his current tenure at Cornell University in New York in 2001. When he created "Crenshaw Stories," he was a visiting professor at UC Riverside. And though he's exhibited at major institutions and galleries since, the Crenshaw work sticks with him.

recent extension of “Crenshaw Stories” at Cornell University will feature some of the statements in a spoken word opera, in which the “Stories” will serve as the libretto.

Learned to be ‘Cool’ in LA

“When I was ten years old I rode a train to California with my grandparents. It was the first time I saw the Rockies, and I will never forget how the mountains suddenly loomed against the horizon at the end of a day spent passing through flat Midwestern farmland. I realized the geographical immensity of America during that trip, as well as the immense psychic differences between my neighborhood in Chicago, with its brick apartment buildings and treeless streets, and the palm trees and stucco of L.A. I stayed for a month with my cousins in Inglewood, where I learned how to skateboard, a skill as yet unknown back home. When I returned to Chicago, I was, for the first time, cool.”

An Adventure on the Bus

“I remember that the first time I rode a public bus it was one that went down Crenshaw. I was ten years old and as soon as I got on I knew I was in for an adventure. I walked about three steps down the aisle when the bus started to jerk me back and forth until I found a seat. Black, White, Hispanics, and other ethnics were on the bus sitting next to each other like good friends. I felt so comfortable that I took a nap. Ever since I think I’ve been in love with the RTD.”

A New Year’s Celebration

“I remember riding the subway with my daughter at midnight on New Year’s Eve one year, and it was just like Times Square, with a carload of complete strangers hugging each other and singing ‘Auld Lang Syne.’”

“When I came to Cornell, they asked if I wouldn’t give a presentation on the project,” he said. “I’m sort of giving them more than they asked for.”

Spector has teamed with musician Kevin Ernste – who also teaches at Cornell – to create an opera based around the “Crenshaw Stories” project.

“We’ve developed an opera, in which the ‘Stories’ function as the libretto,” he said. “The story of the opera is propelled by the ‘Crenshaw Stories.’”

‘Something very powerful’

Ernste has set Spector’s work of art turned oral history to a style of music Spector called “aleatoric.” The music is minimalist, in the style of John Cage or Philip Glass, and wanders in complicated progressions of chords.

Spector has gathered 20 performers who will read the “Crenshaw Stories” text over the music, re-telling the stories that still appear on the wall of the Green Line Crenshaw station.

“People are nervous about singing, but everyone is happy to recite, so we’ll use the speaking to augment the music and package the whole thing together into something very powerful,” he said.

Metro Deputy Executive Officer of Creative Services Maya Emsden – who supervised the original project in the mid-1990s – said the expansion of the project is fitting.

“It’s quite moving and wonderful to see [how] this art project continues to grow and live outside the station,” she said.

Spector’s new “Crenshaw Stories” will be performed at the Cornell University Sage Chapel on Nov. 11.