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Art ahoy – sculptor hopes to send his work on a cruise

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GAZETTE ART CRITIC

First there was Christo, the Bulgarian-born artist who created an international reputation by wrapping up dozens of Florida islands in miles of plastic and planting hundreds of gigantic umbrellas along the coastlines of California and Japan. He has also sought permission for 20 years to wrap the Reichstag building in Berlin.

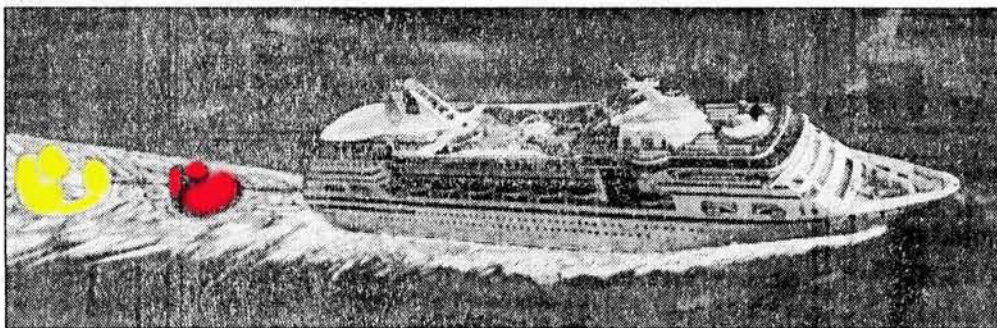
Now, there is Austrian-born Leo Schimanszky, who, in Christo-like fashion, dreams of being the first artist to send a floating exhibition of his work literally around the world.

Schimanszky, who lives in Hudson, wants to build two huge sculptures – semi-abstract versions of a man and a woman, made out of fibreglass and stuffed with foam – and have them hauled from port to port by various ocean-going vessels. He hopes that the sculptures would measure 30 cubic feet and 24 cubic feet, respectively. The larger one, the “male,” would be roughly the size of a three-storey house.

“The world hasn’t seen anything like this,” the artist explained recently, his eyes dancing with excitement. “It will be one of the largest floating exhibitions ever, and it will be the first to go around the world.”

Schimanszky figures that the whole project will cost between \$1.5 million and \$2 million, from start to finish. And he estimates that the entire tour would take up to 10 years to complete. He is hoping to have a mini-exhibition of his smaller works at each port of call.

The 49-year-old artist has started to drum up



How Leo Schimanszky envisions his sculptures will be transported from port to port.

corporate sponsorship for his project. And although no companies have firmly committed themselves to the idea, he said many of the people he has talked to are keenly interested in the concept.

“It’s starting to gather momentum,” the artist explained, over a glass of red wine at a downtown restaurant. “You see everything fits together in the time we live in, and people see what I am trying to say.”

In the face of wars, racism, countries breaking up and other form of turbulence, Schimanszky’s project is meant to represent peace, harmony and togetherness – harmony between the sexes, among countries involved in the project, and even among different races. The “male” figure is to be a shade of white color, while the “female” is to be red.

“I will be bringing the world together in the cause of culture, in the cause of art. . . . This is my hottest dream yet.”

The sculptures are to be launched from Montreal. And when their worldwide tour has been completed, Schimanszky intends to give one sculpture to this city and the other to his native city of Vienna. “The ‘mother’ will go to Canada because I had the idea for the project here. The birth of it was here.”

Why did this project take on such spectacular proportions?

In part, he replied, because the idea just sort of began to take on a life of its own. Schimanszky made a couple of floating sculptures a few years back. But they are so small they can float in the pond in his yard in Hudson.

Still, the more he thought about the idea of an international exhibition of floating sculptures, the larger the concept grew, until it got to the point where all he could ask of himself was why not?

“A space-shuttle flies to space,” he explained. “Schimanszky’s floating sculptures will go around the world.”

Does he really think he can get such a massive, complex and expensive project launched, especially during the current tough times in the art market?

For sure, Schimanszky replied. But he will know better when he gets back from Vienna in July. He is leaving in a couple of weeks to mount two exhibitions of his works in the Austrian capital. And, of course, he will be trying to rally corporate support for his flotilla of sculptures.

In Europe, there seems to be a deeper understanding of the importance of culture as the foundation of a civilized nation, Schimanszky said. And one sure indication of this is that while the recession has sent the Canadian art market plummeting, Schimanszky can still make a living from his work in Europe.

“All the collectors here and all the dealers, they’ve all got a bad case of the shakes,” the sculptor said. “But in Europe, they’re still buying. . . . Now, I ship everything I make to Europe. If it stays here, it just sits around.”

Leo Schimanszky is represented in Montreal by Galerie Dominion and Galerie Bernard Desroches. A hard-cover catalogue of his works, published last fall, is available at Paragraph bookstore for \$90.