

In Binghamton, NY we created a procession that interpreted how various cultural traditions present in the region mark time and acknowledge the passing of the new year. The final work was presented as an anchoring event in First Night Binghamton's annual New Year's celebration and was the culmination of three months of community dialogues and workshops.

The project began with questions – ventured through open brainstorming meetings, interviews, ethnographic research, and casual encounters. And in its wake, it left further questions – a fertile curiosity seeded by the final procession's Surreal and peripatetic performance of gilded church domes, twirling mushrooms, illuminated wrens, and giant figures of all sorts. Although we created elements from ten traditions in all, for purposes of this narrative I'll focus on one in particular.

The gold domes were born out of conversations with older folks from the area's large Eastern European population. A few recalled a New Year's (or St. Basil's Day) folk ritual that involved washing in a basin with gold coins at the bottom. Others remembered the water, sanctified through this ritual, being brought from home to home to confer blessings. Many knew the practice only anecdotally through the accounts of parents or grandparents old enough to remember the "old country". Accounts were incomplete, dimly recalled, memories cobbled together from an indistinguishable blend of inherited stories and first-hand experiences. Gradually, though, a cohesive picture of this simple but potent ritual began to emerge.

Ultimately we distilled these conversations into drawings and designs that captured the spirit of the stories we had collected. We made precise replicas of each of the distinctive domes adorning the region's famed Orthodox churches. Beneath each dome, we simulated a cascade of water, punctuated by suspended golden coins. Both the diaphanous curtain of water and the shimmering coins were lit by a shaft of light that shone downward from within the domes creating the effect of a shower of light, reflecting not only this specific Orthodox tradition but reinforcing three common threads – ritual bathing, wealth, and light – that revealed the shared imagery present among many disparate New Year traditions we were exploring.

Construction of the domes took place in community workshops, and as people began to talk over the worktables, further stories were exchanged, revisions made, and embellishments added. Many participants in the making were not of Eastern European origin, and their curiosity led them to learn more about the story behind the objects they were working on. As work progressed within the casual workshop environment, frequent and animated conversations took place comparing and contrasting perspectives from related cultures (Greek, Polish, Czech-Moravian). Where questions arose about the origins of the imagery we were using, we deferred whenever possible to the older participants present, encouraging an inter-generational dialogue in which seniors – so often often-overlooked and disregarded these days – could reassert their role as elders and culture-bearers. The importance of this role became self-evident, as we realized of the younger folks whose ancestors *were* from Ukraine or Russia, knew nothing at all of St Basil's Day or bathing in coins. Clearly this folk

tradition (like so many of the others we were working with) had, over the course of a few generations, become a narrative on the verge of extinction.

This is why we often think of our procession artworks as containment vessels for fragile narratives. As long as the object exists in public performance (or is built in public workshops), it will raise questions for those who don't know the symbolism behind it. The specific drama carried in the image of seven 12'-tall floating domes trailing glowing tendrils and golden discs will persist as a lingering question, an unfulfilled desire to *know* ("What *were* those things?"). Our goal was never to re-enact or reconstruct, but to create interpretive works to stimulate new curiosity in old things. Curiosity spawns speculations, half-answers, Google-searches, dialogues, and sooner or later the answer emerges – not from the community artists, who act merely as catalysts – but straight from the source, a Ukrainian grandmother or local step-dancer or parish priest who had never thought to tell their story because, until now, no one had up thought to ask.

The same process informed our other works for the procession, as members from Binghamton's various ethnic groups came forward to share their stories. At one meeting, a German woman introduced us to the figure of the chimney sweep and the red-and-white amanita mushrooms that accompany the New Year through central Europe. A Laotian man brought photos from a *baci* flower ceremony to mark the Buddhist New Year. East Indians offered guidance on the meaning and structure of Deewali lamps, while Irish-Americans told tales of hunting the wren, and Mohawk elders recalled the agrarian myth behind the constellation of the seven sisters. Unsure of what we were looking for, many participants were initially hesitant to contribute their stories, wondering aloud whether their recall was reliable or their specific stories significant or valuable.

When these stories re-emerged as giant effigies, articulated puppets, or illuminated multiples on New Year's Eve – brought to life by months of hard work and performed by hundreds of volunteers – these doubts were supplanted by a sense of inclusion and importance. One normally stoical Irish grandmother reported afterwards that she had wept at the sight of the giant St. Stephen's wren. Some 300 people took part in the final procession, although the number who had directly taken part in the project at some stage of conception, building, and performance was probably closer to a thousand. Many carried elements from someone else's cultural inheritance, imparting the sense that in a local community, pedigree may be less important than participation. The simple physical metaphor of carrying aloft affirms that we can literally hold up one another's traditions in an era when the homogeneity imposed by globalization threatens the very foundations of tradition itself.

Public art is often bound by expectations of grandeur, visibility, and permanence. Our approach was the antithesis of this. We sought to create a moment rather than a monument, a brief and intimate ritual celebrating the hidden narratives that define us and unify us. Although the performance itself lasted less than an hour, the community investment in its construction, and the lingering conversations it left behind extend the moment's reach indefinitely. Even the objects themselves, now part of a known and accessible inventory of puppets, effigies, and lanterns, are being brought out for subsequent processions in the community, and many have expressed anticipation for what next year's collective efforts may yield.