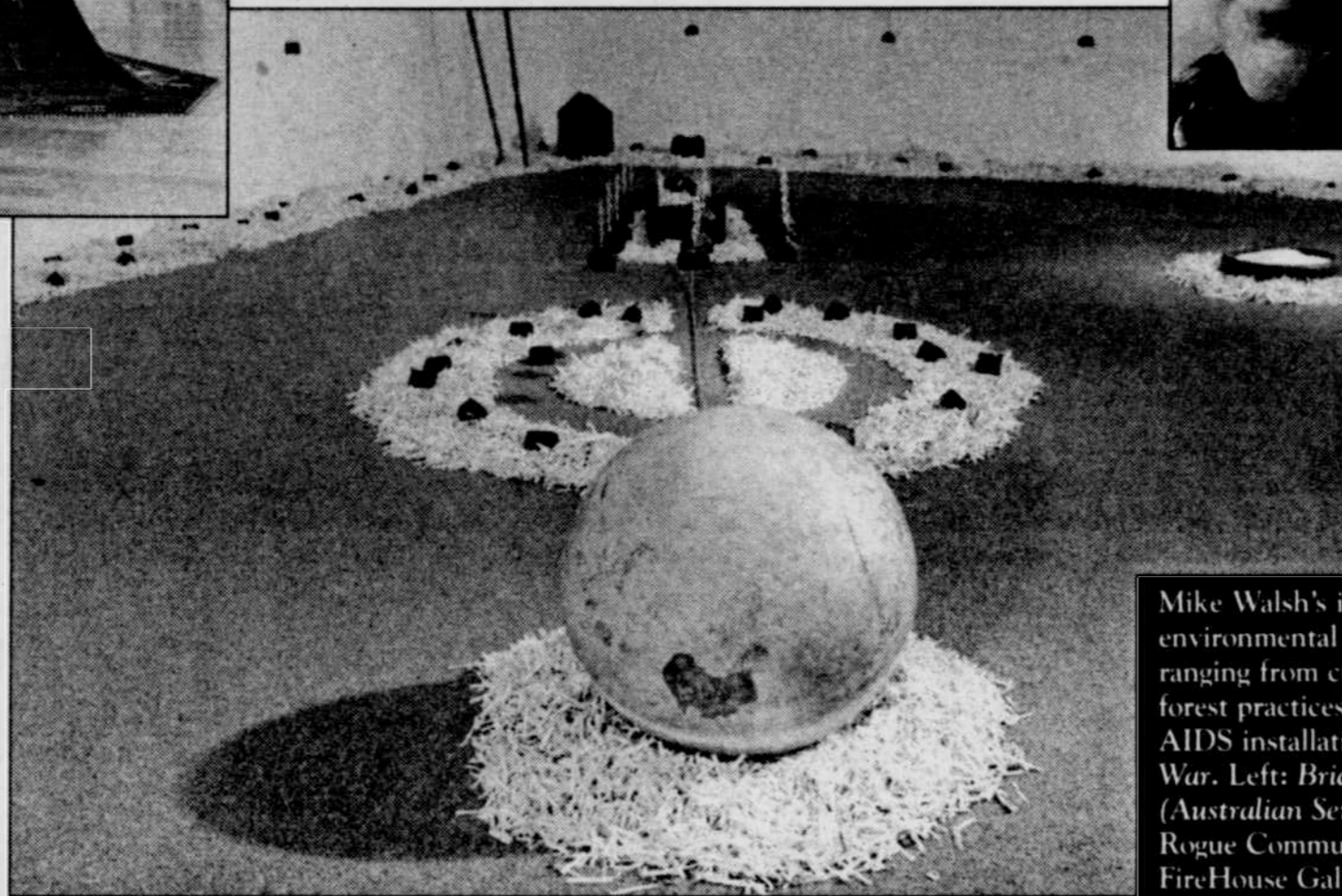
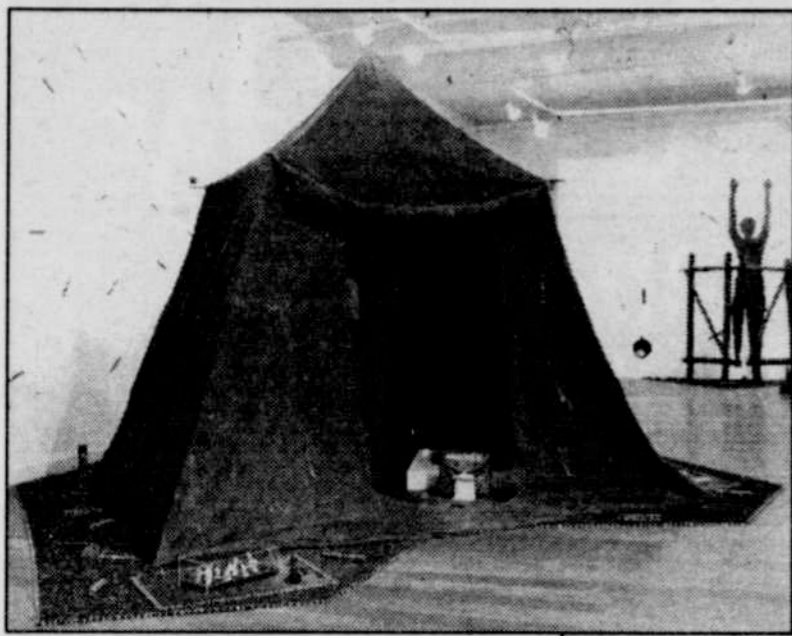


ART

Fragile circles

Eugene artist documents history—lest we forget

BY SUSAN DETROY



If you live in Oregon, you won't miss the art of Mike Walsh.

Renowned in local art circles for his site-specific installations, particularly around AIDS activism, he is a conceptual artist and fifth-generation Oregonian. For 30 years, he has made one-of-a-kind creations born from personal politics and presented in intricate constructions and assemblages of everyday materials.

Walsh's artistic concerns include the environment, native people, American life, history, AIDS and gay culture. An impressive list of educational achievements has helped him structure the personal into the political into the artistic.

Born in 1943 in Dallas and raised both in Falls City and Newport, Walsh earned a bachelor's degree in history at Western Oregon University before attending New York's prestigious Columbia University. He entered the Navy, served in Vietnam and was awarded the Vietnam Combat Action Ribbon and Vietnam Campaign Medal.

Then back to his home state, where he studied art history at University of Oregon, earning a bachelor of fine arts in fibers in 1972. He's been in Eugene ever since.

The artist's first site-specific installation was *Capacity*, in which viewers rearranged hundreds of ropes filling the U of O art department gallery. The hands-on project initiated a series of similar exhibits, including the solo show *Rope Chains*, which traveled throughout the United States and Canada.

Walsh himself is a traveler: Japan, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand and Africa with future plans for Egypt and Peru. His travels function as his inspiration, particularly when creating outdoor installations.

1978's *Stonehenge Burial* was a systematic documentation of a ritual burial at the pre-

historic monument on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, England. In 1999's *Paper Prayers* at Melbourne, Australia's Herring Island Environmental Sculpture Park, Walsh recognized artists with HIV, living and dead. House-shaped placards hung from chains on a timeline documenting more than 100 people—including famous New York subway artist Keith Haring, New York furniture/sculpture artist Scott Burton and Los Angeles architect Frank Israel—whose elegant designs were covered by the Hollywood celebrity set.

That same year *Lest We Forget: A Dialogue on AIDS* opened at Portland State University's Littman Gallery. The site-specific installation explored AIDS through transient ritual, talismans and icons embodying concerns related to mortality, loss of innocence and temporality.

Focusing on biographies of 20 Northwest artists who died of AIDS, the exhibition included bowls filled with blood-red liquid, which formed layers of mold as it evaporated. He describes the scene as a "battlefield of mortality" and characterizes the entire work as memorializing and humanizing the disease, "making visible the invisible."

This exhibit contrasts with Walsh's first installation dealing with AIDS, *Preparing for War*, which was at Eugene's New Zone Gallery in 1985. More invested in the physical body and in danger, the juxtaposition of objects in the installation "suggests purity and contamination as well as safety and vulnerability. [The] nude outline of my body suggests my own vulnerability."

Walsh considers himself an AIDS activist. As an artist, a gay man and a survivor of the Vietnam War, he believes he's in the midst of another war—remaining HIV-negative in a world in which the alternative is likely fatal.

In July 2000 Walsh completed a Web-based project sponsored by the New York City nonprofit Creative Time titled *Structuring Fear*, which featured a new image and text each day. International artists, activists and writers corresponded for a month, telling the story of how AIDS affected their communities.

Walsh's undergraduate history background remains a strong influence in all his work. Boxing in objects underscores his interest in mapping, framing and archiving diverse social and

environmental issues such as AIDS, cultural identity and Northwest salmon habitat.

He creates the feeling and pretense of museum artifacts in his trademark use of vitrines, which allow contents to be viewed from the top and sides. These Plexiglas display cabinets are put to good use in *Bridges: Fragile Circle (Australian Series)*, which takes over Rogue

Community College's FireHouse Gallery in Grants Pass through Dec. 13.

Composed of a wide array of materials, his latest installation symbolically documents the cultural conflict between contemporary Australian white and aboriginal cultures. Aboriginal, native painting fragments are paired with occidental, white culture objects, creating conceptual maps.

On top of this exhibit, Walsh has been commissioned to install *Works: Fragments of the*

Material Age for the Eugene Public Library's grand opening next month. The building is an example of a new millennium dominated by computer tools such as the Polaris online card catalog; reminding us of those original little index cards, Walsh is

creating 50 cards symbolically representing the cultural transition from paper to electronic communication.

Viewing these will preserve the memory of the accidental associations users of the old system experienced while thumbing through the paper cards. Walsh invited adults, teens and children to select a favorite book, quote and comment, which is incorporated into the 9- by 7-inch wall placards.

By involving the community, *Works* becomes a collage record of Eugene's love of the written word and is a powerful, quiet reverence for the past—an act of mourning the sense of spirit and history that vanishes with outdated systems. Walsh feels it's a reminder of forgoing slower, more scenic routes, the green valleys, for the sterile speed of cyberspace. □

Bridges: Fragile Circle (Australian Series) by MIKE WALSH is on display through Dec. 13 at Rogue Community College's FireHouse Gallery, 3345 Redwood Highway in Grants Pass.

SUSAN DETROY is a Eugene free-lance writer and artist.

Mike Walsh's installations explore environmental and social issues ranging from cultural identity to forest practices. Center: the first AIDS installation, *Preparing for War*. Left: *Bridges: Fragile Circle (Australian Series)* is on display at Rogue Community College's FireHouse Gallery.

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