

Gowing and Perez, two Astoria residents, are merging their eclectic skills for the fourth year to produce what they describe as “installation art.” Because much of the planning and construction goes unseen by the public, the people and process behind it are not commonly known.

The artists shared some of their insights and experiences in advance of the 2018 festival.

### ‘Dark Oz’

This year’s theme in the showroom is “Dark Oz.”

“Oz is a favorite story for both of us,” Gowing said. “It definitely goes with the pagan dark arts. Witchcraft and magic is what it’s all about.”

And, she said, “we work really big.” “The backdrop alone is 30 by 16 feet, with two witches, flying monkeys perched on whiskey barrels and smokestacks made from fog machines. And simulated fire.”

She added: “We’d love to use real fire, you know, but the town has burned down three times already, so ... no.”

Perez said they also pondered the possibility of an actual tornado but weren’t sure it would be practical, if even possible.

“We always start out with a million ideas and end up narrowing them down,” she said. “I’m used to working with things that move, as a costumer and special-effects makeup artist, and Andee’s good with things that don’t move. We have different skill sets that complement each other.”

Perez summed up Gowing’s own far-reaching background in plant and animal taxonomy, as well as carpentry and landscape design: “Andee’s really good at making things.”

Planning the next year’s theme begins promptly after the one-day event, and gathers steam over the months, with much of the brainstorming kept out of the public eye. “We start out pretending we have a million dollars and all the time in the world. Then we edit,” Gowing chuckled.

### Dark arts and crafts

Much of their materials are found in nature — moss, branches, animal bones — or purchased from thrift stores. “We do a lot of dumpster diving,” Perez said. “We both grew up poor, so we’re pretty used to being creative in how we use resources.”



Astoria artists Andee Gowing, left, and Gad Perez



Using plywood, Styrofoam, chicken wire, LED lighting, PVC pipe, thrift-store sheets and cloth, “monster mud” (a combination of drywall joint compound and latex paint), along with other items at hand, the artists craft an atmosphere that is satisfyingly eerie and occasionally unsettling.

Given this panoply of unorthodox materials and the range of innovative demands their assembly calls for, Perez

observed, “I think it was through this process that we finally accepted that we’re artists.”


Gowing agreed. “It’s not an art that you come across that often. You meet painters, sculptors, but this is a little different.”

Past themes have included “Hecate,” “Baphomet” and “Kunin and Munin.” These have all featured a central altar on stage, memorable recreations of a sarcophagus or a table elaborately decorated with animal skulls and bones. Kunin and Munin, the ravens of Odin, were towering 12-foot sculptures (alongside a third mythical beast) — all three of which, incidentally, still stand stoically in certain Astoria front yards, silently baffling neighbors and passersby.

“There have been people who see this festival advertised and think it’s a pagan festival,” Gowing said. “Then they get here and it’s a beer festival. And then there are people who think it’s a beer festival, and find all these other dark arts.”

After hearing the artists’ plans for the Oz-themed characters and settings, it seemed that one thing was missing from the scene: the Wizard himself.

Perez put that to rest: “Anyone who knows the ‘Wizard of Oz’ story knows that, in the end, the wizard doesn’t matter.”

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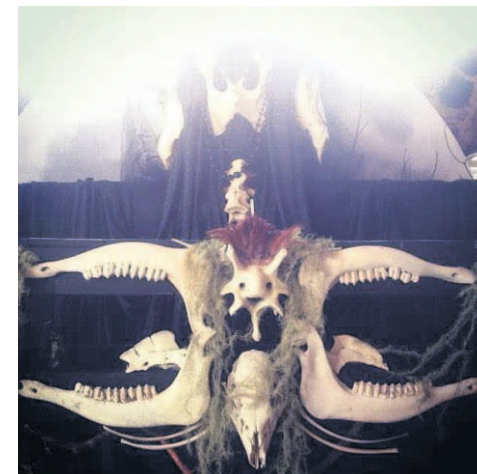
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The Festival of Dark Arts takes place Saturday, Feb. 17.



COURTESY GAD PEREZ

The Baphomet Altar from the 2016 Festival of the Dark Arts, constructed by Andee Gowing and Gad Perez



COURTESY GAD PEREZ

Detail from the Hecate Altar built by Andee Gowing and Gad Perez for the 2015 Festival of Dark Arts