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## The Battle for Queens

**Artist Duke Riley plans to stage a Coliseum-style naval war; artists and curators to don gladiator gear**

During tough economic times, Imperial Rome distracted itself by staging naval battles inside a flooded Coliseum. Artist Duke Riley plans to wage a similar spectacle, only in Queens, N.Y.

Next week, city parks engineers are set to fill up a vacant pool on the grounds of the 1964 World's Fair so Mr. Riley can launch his homemade armada of 30-foot-long Spanish galleons, Egyptian river boats, and Polynesian war canoes. All the vessels were made mainly from recycled materials and invasive reeds yanked from the nearby wetlands.

Much of the Thursday battle is still unscripted, but teams of artists and curators in gladiator gear intend to board their vessels and sink their rivals in front of spectators dressed in togas. Mr. Riley, whose tattoo-style drawings are collected by major patrons like Whitney Museum of American Art board member Melva Bucksbaum and the Brooklyn Museum, will be on hand himself and may dole out buckets of fake blood. He says he can't afford to pay workers, so all the participants on the project are unpaid volunteers. Rebecca Goyette, an educator at the Museum of Modern Art who has been assigned to play Caligula's wife, says she won't mind getting splattered: "I want to fight."

The event, titled "Those About To Die Salute You," is shaping up to be the city's alternative art party of the summer, a theatrical standout amid a recession that has made it difficult for arts groups to produce public art on a grand scale. The Public Art Fund, the nonprofit that helped turn Danish artist Olafur Eliasson's towering "New York City Waterfalls" into an East River fixture a year ago, says its funding has shrunk by a third.

Mr. Riley found a key way to keep his project growing: He scavenges, using whatever materials he can find and enlisting art-loving volunteers to donate anything potentially useful, from beets to broom bristles.

Installation artists like Chakaia Booker and Tomás Saraceno have long incorporated recyclable materials like tires or plastic bags in their artwork, often to make an eco-friendly political point. But during a downturn, recycling can turn into a financial necessity for artists.

Last summer, Mr. Riley was approached by the Queens Museum of Art, which sought to burnish its reputation for promoting promising young artists



Glen DiCrocco for The Wall Street Journal  
Duke Riley stands over his "Those About To Die Salute You" project

and draw summer crowds to its home on the site of the 1939 and 1964 World's Fairs, now known as Flushing Meadows Corona Park. The museum was spending carefully, having just raised \$50 million for its plan to expand into a former hockey rink next door; it was also planning cutbacks and several layoffs. Mr. Riley's naval battle was given a \$12,000 production budget. (Mr. Eliasson's waterfalls cost \$15.5 million to build.)

Tom Finkelppearl, the museum's director, says the artist was chosen in part for his resourceful reputation. A Boston native, Mr. Riley, 37, built his career by collecting—or inventing—tales of early American sailors and swashbucklers. He often tries to reenact their sea exploits or document their histories with exhibits complete with faux maps, uniforms, flags and scrimshaw. He has a master's degree in fine art from Pratt, yet he cultivates a dockworker persona, often swimming at night in the Gowanus Bay. (His repurposed artifacts and nautical ink drawings sell for between \$3,000 and \$50,000, according to his dealer Alberto Magnan.)

Mr. Riley garnered attention in 2007 when the Coast Guard arrested him for floating his homemade, Revolutionary War-style submarine close to the Queen Mary 2 cruise ship anchored in New York Harbor. After terrorism-related fears were put to rest, the city's police commissioner, Raymond Kelly, chided the artist's "marine mischief" and released him.

For the Queens Museum, Mr. Riley proposed a naval battle reminiscent of naumachia, a type of bloody sea battle conducted in basins, lakes and amphitheatres to entertain Roman emperors like Caesar, Nero and later, Napoleon in Paris. More lavish than regular gladiator games, these boat battles were sometimes saved for moments when the restless or hungry masses needed placating, historians say. Mr. Riley says he appreciated the sentiment, as the world suffers through an economic downturn.

The artist also found a parallel in the 1920s economic decadence of the "Great Gatsby" era when the park in Queens was a coal ash heap. He offered to build his boats using *Phragmites australis*, a wheat-like reed that is choking out the biodiversity of the park's lakes and nearby wetlands because it can tolerate the ashy pollutants still seeping underneath.

The concept was a hit with the Queens Museum, Mr. Finkelppearl says: "I thought we were getting bathtub-sized toy boats, but then it all started growing and growing."

A parks department spokeswoman said the city approved the project but referred further calls to the museum. In October, the artist and his assistant began cutting reeds. A month later, they were seeking volunteer harvesters via Craigslist, eventually culling a crew of nearly two dozen. The group bundled enough reeds to pack his 1,000-square-foot studio like a hay bale. By January, he had trundled a pickup truck's worth of reeds to the paper makers at the Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions in New Brunswick, N.J.

Seeking room for the rest, he convinced the museum in early April to let him take over the 50,000-square-foot World's Fair Ice Rink, a wood-paneled time capsule about to be dismantled to make way for the museum expansion. Cannibalization began subtly: Hockey sticks became boat oars, ceiling tiles became miniature Coliseum arches, cassette tapes in the sound booth became manes and tails for an entire menagerie of animals that he started carving from the hockey rink's foam floorboards.

Last Saturday, the hive of volunteers labored away in the dusty rink. Guns N' Roses blared from a radio as Habby Osk sat attaching chinstraps to hardhats painted gold and topped with broom bristles to give them a gladiatorial look. Since graduating from the School of Visual Arts in May, Ms. Osk says she hasn't been able to find work in the art world so she agreed to volunteer with Mr. Riley's project. "I'd rather get paid," she says, "but I like being part of something creative."