

FALL/WINTER 2014
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land + people

the
A **R** **T**
issue

- +ART FOR PARKS' SAKE
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IN ST. PAUL
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ESPERANZA SPALDING

A BENEFIT TO
MEMBERS OF

THE
TRUST
for
PUBLIC
LAND



TRAILBLAZERS

FATHER *of* DRAGONS



THE MASTER MOSAIC-MAKER BRINGING FOLK ART TO LIFE
(WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM THE ESPRESSO)



NAME: JOLINO BESERRA · AGE: 57 · RESIDENCE: SILVERLAKE—LOS ANGELES, CA



To create the nearly 40-foot-long dragon, Beserra and volunteers calling themselves “the Mosaic Mafia” cut, smoothed, and hand-placed thousands of pieces of broken tile, crockery, and other found materials.

PROFESSION: Mosaic artist specializing in *pique-assiette* (using found objects, memorabilia, and recycled material). I think of myself as a storyteller—I assemble pieces of history to tell a story.

ASSIGNMENT: Design and construct a climbing structure for Maywood Avenue Park in Los Angeles County.

HOW HE GOT HIS START: It was the summer of 1990, and I was a burned-out art director at CBS. I saw an article on the restoration of Watts Towers, so I volunteered to help. I fell in love with the style of Simon Rodia, the artist who created the towers. He collected bits and pieces and constructed that beautiful monument out of stuff that had been thrown away. Working on the towers inspired me to try my hand at mosaic, focusing on found objects. I never renewed my contract at CBS!

BIRTH OF THE DRAGON: The Trust for Public Land contacted me and told me the people of Maywood wanted the park to pay tribute to [Mexican politician and reformer] Benito

Juárez. He was from Oaxaca, so I immediately thought of the *alebrijes*—the Oaxacan folk art tradition of fantastical carved creatures. They wanted a structure on which kids could climb and swing and slide, so a giant dragon seemed like a fun choice. It wasn’t until the pieces were being unloaded—by a crane off a flatbed truck—that I was hit with the 40-foot reality of what I was in for. I was like, I better go get my cappuccino machine!

REDISCOVERING HIS ROOTS: When I was growing up, my family was focused on assimilation. We didn’t learn Spanish, I didn’t know much about my culture or my history. Now, through my art, I’m connecting to my heritage. Through this process, I discovered I have a relative in Oaxaca who creates these *alebrijes*! I have been sending him pictures of the dragon as it’s coming together and he’s very happy.

WHY PUBLIC ART: Public art is important everywhere, but especially in communities that don’t have amenities—that don’t have beautiful, green spaces. We had a community day where the kids

got to help tile the dragon. People were shocked to see something so elaborate being created just for them. And I understood, because I also grew up in a neighborhood that was resigned to being ignored. My life changed in the fourth grade when a teacher told me I was an artist. No one had ever told me that before or encouraged me to be something. That’s why this project is so important to me—I hope that some kid plays on this piece and feels inspired to create something big.

WHY THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND: My hope is that the Maywood dragon makes people sit up and take notice and feel proud that people cared enough to bring this amazing park to their neighborhood. I hope that it makes the community stronger and more sure-footed. That’s why The Trust for Public Land’s work is so invaluable: in this time of cutbacks on everything that doesn’t show an immediate, bottom-line profit, The Trust for Public Land is making bigger investments that will pay off in the long term.