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Rockman and Other Sightings

Roaming the streets of San Francisco

By Kat Avila | Web Published 4.13.2004

a light rain
falls with the sakura...
it's time to fly home



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Last Saturday, I was in Osaka watching the National Bunraku Theatre (traditional puppet drama) and in Kyoto with hundreds of people enjoying cherry blossom viewing festivities. Last Sunday, I was in young contemporary Shibuya, a part of Tokyo, at an Internet manga (comics) cafe catching up on e-mail. Then it was Sunday again because California is one day behind Tokyo, and I was in San Francisco.

I'm back after one year in Tokyo. The English accents are different - Russian and New York accents sound novel to my ears. In Tokyo, I was surrounded by British and Australian accents. Also, people are fatter in the U.S., almost comedically much fatter. The streets are dirtier. There are so many homeless people.

As I'm scribbling away in the shadow of a skyscraper in the Financial District, a homeless white man approaches me.

HIM: Can you help me out with 85 cents please?

ME: (a bit worried about my own situation) I don't have a job.

HIM: O.K. God bless you.

A homeless black woman holds out a

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tall paper cup. "Spare change or a dollar?" It's a refrain I'll hear repeatedly as I roam the streets of San Francisco.

As I head toward The Mexican Museum at Fort Mason Center, I see a brown middle-aged man piling up rocks on the beach near the Hyde Street Pier. He's trying to balance this huge fan-shaped boulder on top of a small round rock. Another crazy San Franciscan. A seagull laughs loudly. I walk off, turning to look back midway up a hill. My eyes pop out. The guy's actually done it!

I return to watch him construct a second impossible column of rocks, then another, and another. I am awestruck. There is a quality of worshipfulness about his activity. He is balancing sun-beaten, ocean-worn boulders and bricks in wonderfully beautiful and playful compositions. Bill Dan later points out how two of his rock sculptures appear to have faces. "He looks happy to have been built," I remark about one.

Bill Dan is a longtime resident of San Francisco who immigrated from Indonesia. He started balancing rocks in 1994 and it's become a way of life for him. The muscles in his body are universally strong, being challenged daily from many different angles and positions while lifting and balancing boulders.

"Anything is possible," he says. This is the message of his rock sculptures. He shares a story about a woman on her way to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge. The beach site where he was building was her last stop. After she saw what he was doing, she changed her mind. His sculptures have that kind of positive effect on people.

He talks about how to balance the rocks. For him, there's a clicking in his mind when the rocks are

balanced. He warns you have to let go at that point, because if you don't the rocks will already have shifted again. It's all in the timing.

Many people before him have balanced rocks, are balancing, and will balance. But it's the artist within Bill Dan that makes what he does especially unique. To see his work, please see a friend's web site about him at <http://www.rock-on-rock-on.com>

Finally I take off for The Mexican Museum leaving the rock sculptures at the mercy of the encroaching tide.

"Contested Narratives: Chicana Art from the Permanent Collection" is the museum's current exhibit (January 21-May 15). The represented artists are Elizabeth Rodriguez, Linda Lucero, Patricia Rodriguez, Eva Garcia, Ester Hernandez, Carmen Lomas Garza, Santa Barraza, Patssi Valdez, Kathy Vargas, Delilah Montoya, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Yreina Cervantez, and Irene Perez.

A non-related, polychrome ceramic "Giant Tree of Life" by Alfonso Soteno dominates the exhibit space. I ask about its questionable placement. I'm told that many European visitors want to see the Soteno piece, so rather than send them to a separate location it shares the same space. This problem, as well as having to close the museum between exhibit changes, will be alleviated when the museum moves to a larger facility in 2006.

I find Patricia Rodriguez's pieces especially relevant. One is a print from a 1977 calendar. The print remembers Josefa Segovia who was lynched during the Gold Rush for killing a miner who had assaulted her. To this day, women are victimized by lawyers and courts for

forcefully defending themselves and their children. The other Rodriguez piece is "Sewing Box" (1985) that contrasts gender roles using a sewing box whose compartments are filled with nothing especially unusual, except for the bottom drawer which contains a line of plastic toy soldiers in firing position.

Kathy Vargas's "Codex Not-Vargas" (1992) also catches my attention. It's a hand-colored photo essay/diary about her father in a clear Plexiglas folding frame. "So many things happen to people with feathers. They disappear while waiting for the day when feathers are worn with bowler hats and turbans at the United Nations," she has philosophically written under one picture.

For more information regarding The Mexican Museum/El Museo Mexicano, see their web site at <http://www.mexicanmuseum.org>

Kat hopes the Easter bunny drops some gold eggs into her basket.

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