

The Art of the Stump | By Tim Murphy on April 8, 2007

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IT was a few winters ago, when Nancy Bruning was walking along Cabrini Boulevard in Washington Heights to meet the exercise class she leads in Fort Tryon Park, that she spotted an unusual object atop a tree stump.

The piece, an odd sculpture “made of cast-off Christmas ornaments and a branch of a pine tree,” as Ms. Bruning recalled, was gone the next time she passed by. But over the coming weeks, she found other sculptures on the stump, whimsically fashioned from scraps of old tires or plastic and painted to look like fish or snakes. Most were signed “Bokov Recycle NYC.”

“Then I realized it,” said Ms. Bruning, recalling conversations with an eccentric local resident with a Russian accent who had said he was an artist. “That was Bokov.” She was referring to Konstantin Bokov, a 67-year-old Ukrainian immigrant who for several years has been beguiling his Washington Heights neighbors with paintings and sculptures he crafts from refuse found in the neighborhood. Mr. Bokov leaves his creations in the open, on stumps along Cabrini Boulevard, for example, or halfway up the steep steps at 181st Street and Pinehurst Avenue.



Konstantin Bokov's handiwork near Cabrini Boulevard. Credit... Laura Whitehorn

And though some of Mr. Bokov's works can be bought for several hundred dollars apiece at the van der Plas Gallery at the South Street Seaport, he is happy if local residents snatch up the sculptures he leaves on the street.

Recently, he said, a young woman from the neighborhood told him how much she enjoyed seeing his creations on the stump. “I say to her, ‘Next time, you take it, because somebody will destroy it,’” he said. With his tall, lean frame, his olive trench coat cinched with a bright blue belt and his armfuls of junk, Mr. Bokov is a familiar figure in his neighborhood. He is also elusive. Though he says he has lived in Washington Heights for 23 years, he has no phone and he did not respond to notes left for him at the stump.

Mr. Bokov was spotted the other day on Cabrini Boulevard carrying several pieces of discarded metal and plywood. Later, over coffee at a local diner, he recounted his pastoral boyhood in Ukraine, his immersion in the Soviet-era Moscow art scene and his 1975 move to New York with his wife and son.

After leaving the diner, he bounded down a flight of winding steps to the base of Fort Tryon Park to point out a gnarled tree bough he had painted to resemble a dragon. “You think I go to Whitney Museum and see something like that?” he said. “Never.” Many local residents return the affection expressed in his gifts to the neighborhood. “He loves the sunlight, sunrise, beautiful days,” said Aliza Holtz, a biomedical consultant to whom Mr. Bokov gave a painting of the sun on the underside of a paper-plate holder made of straw. “He seems to be a man who is very grateful for the simple things in life.”