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ARTS | WESTCHESTER

## A Shoe Sun and a Wire Ram

Federico Uribe's Man-Made Nature, in Yonkers



Laura Vookles

A sun, dominating one of the three gallery rooms that the installation "Fantasy River" is spread over, is made from about 200 Puma shoes. The cornstalks below the sun are shovel handles.

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Stepping into "Federico Uribe: Fantasy River," a sprawling installation at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, visitors encounter fish swimming in schools, a beaver building a dam and crows perching in a cornfield beneath an enormous sun.

Not until they move closer do they discover the defining quality of Mr. Uribe's work: the unexpected materials he has used to construct his world.

In it, the fish are paintbrush handles, and the beaver and its dam are made from hundreds of colored pencils. The crows are bits of twisted bicycle tires and the cornstalks are shovel handles painted green. Mr. Uribe's sun, measuring nine feet in diameter, is constructed with approximately 200 yellow Puma sneakers that he disassembled, flattened and mounted on the wall, and countless radiating shoelaces.

The 4,400-square-foot, site-specific installation is the newest iteration of the sculptural landscapes Mr. Uribe has been populating with his composite creations for the last seven years. Bartholomew Bland, the museum's director of curatorial affairs, first saw them in late 2010 in Miami, where Mr. Uribe has lived for the past 13 years. "There's a sensual pleasure to his work, a beauty that draws you in," Mr. Bland said. "Not that many serious contemporary artists embrace beauty, but he does."

"Fantasy River" occupies three galleries. One is for wild animals, where zebras graze and alligators snap at a cheetah. Another is for domesticated species, with bees buzzing around an apiary and chickens roosting in coops. The third, the site of the cornfield and the shining sun, is devoted primarily to natural life in the Hudson Valley. This room includes pieces designed specifically for this exhibition, among them two squirrels that were once a pair of Alexander McQueen shoes.

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Uribe, a trim man with short brown hair and an accent reflecting his native Colombia, sat amid the scenarios discussing his work. He wore custom-made clothing that echoed his

artwork: pants patterned with flowers and a shirt covered in fish. ("Sí," he said, "I always wear clothes like this. I buy fabrics wherever I go.")

He is also always on the lookout for the commonplace items — tennis rackets, computer keys, garden hoses — that he uses to build his installations. He trolls hardware stores and lumberyards; friends give him things they think he might want. "They tell me: 'My grandfather died and he has 10,000 golf balls. Can you use them?'" Mr. Uribe said. Sometimes his choices are based on the way the objects look: artificial fingernails glued onto pencil erasers resemble bumble bees; old-fashioned coiled phone cord suggests a sheep's black coat.

Other decisions are more conceptual, like his use of 45,000 bullet casings for the fur of a tiger. Pointing toward the majestic, metallic creature, he said, "That tiger got killed thousands and thousands of times."

Another metaphoric sculpture is a rowboat made entirely of suitcases, an allusion to the numerous immigrants who, like Mr. Uribe, crossed bodies of water to begin anew in the United States. "They came with nothing but what they were wearing," he said. "They were their own suitcases."

Noting the boat's oars, Mr. Bland said, "I think it's so beautiful that he used shovels for oars, to represent the labor that is involved in getting here."

A prevalent theme in "Fantasy River" is reconnecting manufactured products to their sources in nature. In Mr. Uribe's installation, many animals are constructed from leather shoes. "People kill animals to make shoes," he said. "I am destroying shoes to make animals."

Likewise, Mr. Uribe builds his trees from books. Spines align to form bark, rolled pages serve as branches and covers become leaves. "I am letting them be trees again," he said.

Mr. Uribe uses screws to secure most of the pieces,

and says that the repetitive act of turning each screw is an outlet for his anger. "It's a very aggressive gesture," he said, "and I'm doing it thousands of times a day."

Many of the screws remain visible, and like his other materials, they carry a message.

"I like the idea that people can read my effort in them, the time I have spent screwing every screw," Mr. Uribe said. "They are the testimony of my work."

Mr. Uribe, 50, was raised on a farm where, he said, "I had a terrible childhood, for many reasons." He attended art school and began painting — "Painful paintings relating to religion," he said. "But then my life changed and I couldn't paint anymore and I started playing with objects."

That was 18 years ago. Since then, he has continued to play, albeit with a highly disciplined practice.

"I work six days a week, from nine in the morning till eight at night," he said. "Even when I don't feel like it, I just do it, no excuses."

But it is more than discipline that drives Mr. Uribe. "I work with the purpose of creating beauty and bringing uplifting feelings to people," he said.

He is a man obsessed. "I do this and I can't stop doing it," he said. Then, gesturing around the gallery, he added, "I'm making it bigger and bigger and bigger. It will never be done."

"Federico Uribe: Fantasy River" runs through Aug. 4 at the Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Avenue, Yonkers.

For more information: [hrm.org](http://hrm.org) or (914) 963-4550.

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