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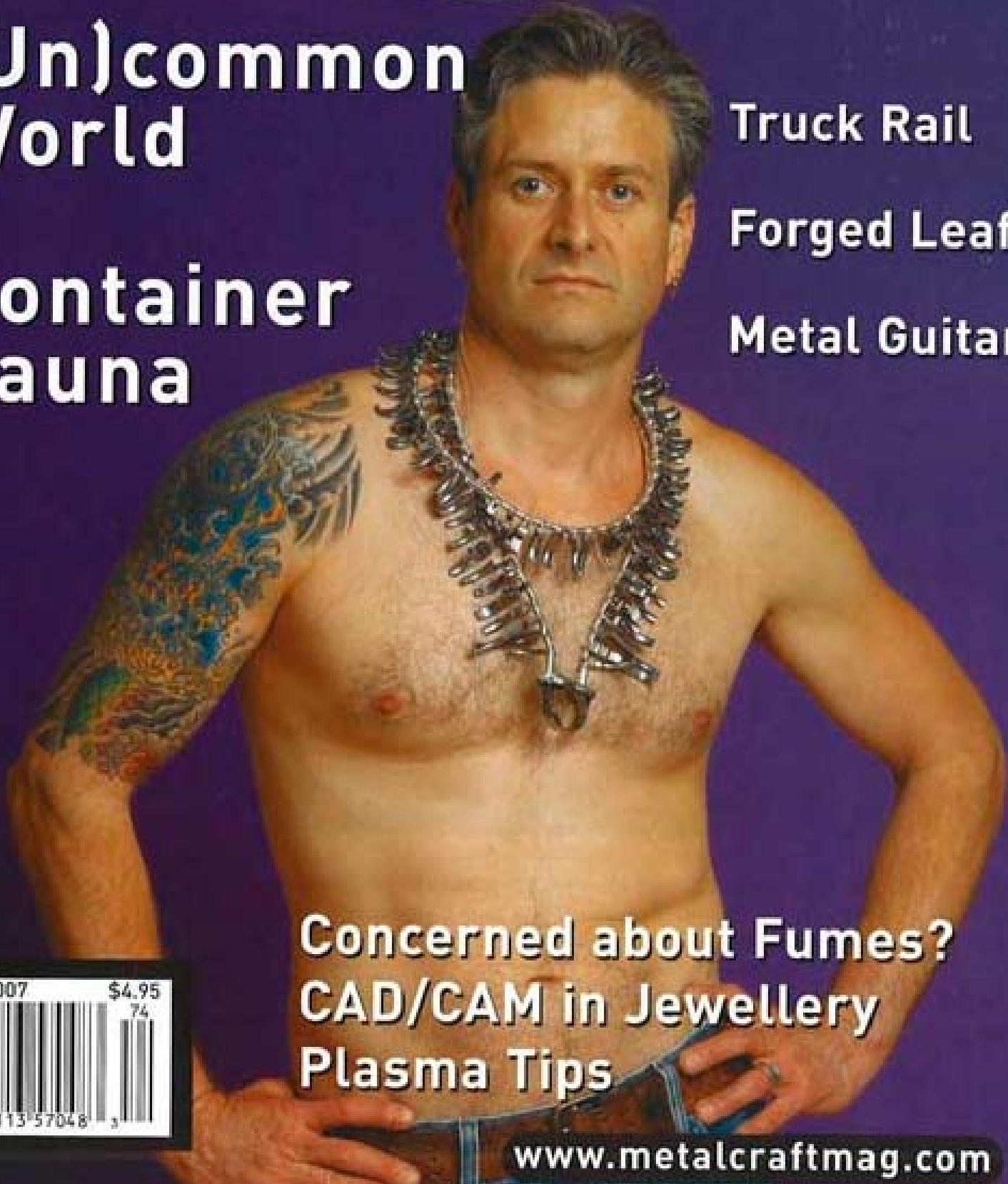
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photo: Nestor Gula

Bally's Uncommon World

by Nestor Gula

Driving into Providence, Rhode Island, I was expecting to see a sea of manicured lawns, well kept houses and a bevy of people wearing pastel coloured clothing.

I exited the highway at the appointed intersection and was shocked to see a scene that exists in any city and town in the United States. There was an over abundance of gas stations and fast food outlets. A decaying business sector spoke volumes about the middle classes flight to the suburbs. I wasn't in downtown Providence and this was definitely not the suburbs. I was in between, an area that was either going to boom with new life and energy in the next few years or it would continue to stagnate.

I actually like these sorts of areas because there is a certain spectacular energy to it. You can hear music on the street, from open windows and the restaurants. People are milling about. Amongst the non-descript housing, retail and industrial buildings, there usually exists a vibrant community with fascinating people.

I was going to visit such a person.

Boris Bally lives and works here. Well, he used to live

here, he recently moved further away, to the suburbs to accommodate his growing family. His essence and his work live here.

His studio and his ex-home are located on a corner lot on the main street and is a converted Legion Hall. You know times are tough when the Legion moves on out. His workspace, which comprises of most of the main floor, is a large open and well-lit space. This is the kind of work space that would make most artists green with envy. Approximately 2,200 square feet in area, with an airy 15 foot ceiling, it is neatly divided into several work areas and even the jumble and material are all stored away well so as not to affect workflow.

Bally is not a conventional artist. He is not a conventional sculptor or jeweler. He uses a variety of materials to create visions. He himself said that on occasion he finds some materials and will hold on to them while he ponders into what to transform the found materials. He has earned quite a reputation through his art with his works being in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art



A great saying for a tray that came off a do not pass sign.

photo: Nestor Gula



photo: J.W. Johnson

A tray made from a discarded New York City subway sign.

Museum in New York and Washington D.C., the Carnegie Museum of Art, and the National Museum of Art.

What drew me to this place in Providence, Rhode Island, to Bally's workshop were chairs.

Not regular chairs, but chairs Bally designed and makes out of discarded highway and street signs. I learnt almost immediately that chairs were not the only thing he makes out of these signs. There are bowls, coasters, key chains, clocks, mirrors, mailboxes, tables and all sorts of other brilliant designs, created with discarded traffic signs.

Bally was not just some lucky bloke who stumbled upon a brilliant idea. He's been working with metal since his early childhood. His father was an award winning industrial designer so he had access to tool, materials and a patient teacher, "My father he always had a studio. So I've always had access to raw materials and I could work through ideas there," he said. "I was making jewellery — the youngest king in craft classes. I loved metals and working with them. Initially I made skateboards, martial arts weapons, and eventually moved to jewellery and sculpture."

To further his education in the art of goldsmithing he did

an apprenticeship with Alexander Schnaffner, and Ralf Düby, the shop manager, in Basel, Switzerland. As his father had roots there he stayed with a distant relative. The apprenticeship, which started in the Winter of 1978 and ended in the Summer 1980, lasted a year and a half and he went to work every day.

"I was lucky because Schnaffner was in the process of writing a book on the apprenticeship system," said Bally, "It was really fortunate, in that I became a guinea pig for that system — rather than just clean toilets, like some apprenticeship systems work, he really wanted me to succeed and learn the techniques. In effect to prove that this tame American gorilla can do these things."

Upon his return to the US, he decided to continue his education and

enrolled in an art school in the fall of 1980. "I went to Philadelphia, to the Tyler School of Art, part of the Temple University," he said. "Even though it was a very good program, unfortunately it started to duplicate the things I learnt in Switzerland. I felt it was a waste of time and I went back home to Pittsburgh."

The chairs were not the first things Bally made out of a discarded traffic sign. "I got a commission from a Boston gallery to make a fireplace set," he said. "So, I needed to make a face, I was hammering up an old road sign and I thought to myself — Wow, look at the graphics on this. I then started to look for more signs. The chairs did not come first — the platters were the first things to be made from road signs. Now there are tables, and other designs. Whatever is left over I keep



photo: J.W. Johnson

Cutlery by Bally

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photo: J.W. Johnson

A one way child's chair.

and make something else. The smallest scraps are even made into key chain fobs."

As the early designs were made and word started to spread, there were many inquiries and plaudits. "The critics loved it people went nuts. It was a huge hit," he said. He was then able to expand his tool collection. "Each time I got a new tool I would find a new design. When my arm gets tired of hammering the signs I got a spinner to do it," said Bally. "I bought myself a lathe and started to cut and mill away at the signs. Then I got myself a hand brake and I thought "What could I do?"

The Chair Story

"The chairs were actually designed for an exhibition in Pittsburgh called Stool Samples, said Bally. "I thought I could make a chair. In two days I whipped it up, and away it went."

Or so he thought. "At that time there was a company making knockoffs of some of my designs from street signs so I thought to myself — I'm not going to be a sucker — giving someone a great free idea. So I made my first ever decoy. I made something out of golf clubs, the ugliest thing I have ever made. It was a terrible chair. It was so ugly I don't have a picture — I don't want to be reminded. My friends cornered me and said — dude, you're slipping."



photo: Nestor

Bally putting the finishing touches on a bowl made from a yeild sign.

The Steel Yard



Boris Bally's favourite place to browse for metal and interesting objects is The Steel Yard.

Located at the historic Providence Steel and Iron site in the heart of Providence's industrial Valley neighborhood. It is not just a regular steel/scrap yard. The 5,612 square foot industrial shop features a foundry, ceramics studio, blacksmithing shop, welding shop, as well as studio space and outdoor work and exhibition space.

The Steel Yard's program focus on arts education and the incubation of new business and arts initiatives, as well as the establishment of a lasting

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For more info: www.thesteelyard.org



photos courtesy of The Steel Yard



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photo: Aaron Usher III

A necklace made out of gun triggers. Bally is wearing it on the cover.

While the ugliest thing that Bally had ever made was being exhibited for all to see he was getting the chair patented.

When officially unveiled the chairs were a massive hit and he frequently gets orders for these unique chairs that sell from 1,000 to 1,800 depending on the design and always has a few hanging around (literally, from the ceiling of his workspace) in case a customer calls.

"The problem becomes when people request specific graphics on the chairs," said Bally. He explains that the real uniqueness of his chairs are the graphics that come from the road signs. "I never know what I will get. It all depends on what is in the scrap pile that is sent to me." He has a deal with several states that allow the scrapped signs to sold to him. Most signs get recycled. "People ask me about chairs with the deer crossing symbol on them or other specific designs of the signs. It is hard to do because I use whatever signs I get from the scrap yard." Bally mentions that the metal for the chairs, all the designs he makes from discarded traffic signs is cut in such a way to make the most visual appeal and not to conserve material. The leftover material, when they are big pieces, are made into coasters or trays or other designs, and small bits into key fobs.

Besides signs, Bally does a lot of other work. He does not want to be known as the sign guy. "I want to keep certain



photo: Aaron Usher III

A detail of the gun trigger necklace.

nets going — there are rings, furniture, flatwear, hollow ware, chairs and other design work. I try to revisit each of these at an appropriate time. This is what I want to do." This jumping around from one specialty to the next, although it keeps Bally motivated, sometimes has its drawbacks. "When I get a commission to make a ring I have to decontaminate the place because of the aluminum dust from the signs," he said.

In 1998-99 he was part of nation wide tour to help get guns off the street. 50 artists were given decommissioned guns and were asked to make something out of them. The funny thing is that he still gets these guns. There are piles of handguns. All of these firearms have been decommissioned by welding certain parts together that makes them more of a chunk of metal than a deadly weapon. The guns came from the city of Pittsburgh gun buy back program. "I'm still getting guns. I created a totem pole out of 2,000 guns," he laughs. "It is still up across from Superior Court in Providence."

Speaking with Bally it is plain to see he is someone who is enjoying what he is doing. "I love doing this its fun and it has the green element of reusing material," he said. "The seeds that I planted twenty years ago are bearing fruit," he smiles. "Somebody phones me up and says we are making a ring book, would you like to contribute and make a ring. I

say sure. And then I go off on that. I like doing charity pieces because it keeps the creative juices flowing. It doesn't make any money but it allows me to play and experiment while fulfilling an obligation.

Driving back home from Rhode Island I pass through the countryside in New England and couldn't help but notice the traffic signs on the edge of the highway. I was thinking about what Bally could do with them but I noticed that more than a few of them had bullet holes in them. I knew about this rural American pastime and asked Bally what he does when he encounters a bullet hole, or two, in the signs he gets. "Not a problem," he explains. "I leave them in. They are part of the sign, part of the design." ■



photo: Nestor Gula

Bally shows off a unique bracelet in front of a display of his other works.

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