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Arts Beat

D.C. an Unwilling Canvas For His Works of Protest

Ethan Shoshan's 'Paper Bombs' Are Deactivated

By Jonathan Padgett

Washington Post Staff Writer Thursday, November 10, 2005; Page C05

He came here last week with ideals and dreams -- sort of a "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" for the 21st-century artist-activist set. Ethan Shoshan, a 25-year-old New Yorker, makes small, multicolored origami cubes -- he calls them "Paper Bombs" -- and places them in public spaces. He also travels with a 6-by-10-foot handmade U.S. flag, with camouflage where the white stripes would be.

Shoshan would hang the flag on the downtown hotel hosting a major academic conference about American studies, right?

Uh, no.

How about a "Paper Bombs" performance in the hub of the hotel's conference center?

Don't think so.

Maybe he'll just swing by the National Museum of American History and put a few of the cubes on the floor so they spell out "war."

Security is not happy.

"I like putting art where it's not expected," says Shoshan, scruffy and

enlarge photo



New York artist Ethan Shoshan had a tough time in Washington with his camouflage-striped flag and "Paper Bombs" -- multicolored origami cubes. (By Jonathan Padgett -- The Washington Post)

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waifish and swimming in a flannel shirt, pushing back his long hair as he woefully recounts his Washington experience. "People are, like, 'Of *course* you're going to get harassed.' But why is that? Why can't there be an open dialogue about these issues?"

American military force -- the issue that dominates Shoshan's art -- seemed to be a perfect fit for the annual conference of the American Studies Association, a group devoted to analyzing American culture and its worldwide impact. About 2,000 professors, students and others gathered Thursday through Sunday at the Renaissance Hotel near the Convention Center.

The conference, called "Groundwork: Space and Place in American Culture," featured sessions with themes including "Reality TV: Reframing Televisual Space," "Homosexuals in Unexpected Places?" and -- deep breath -- "Sites of Suffering: Bodies in Pain, Passions of Place, Rhetorics of Redemption."

The association accepted Shoshan's proposal to present his art during the conference, which Shoshan planned to use as an occasion for impromptu "Paper Bombs" performances throughout the area. He arrived a couple of days early, and by the time the conference opened, he had visited sites that included Arlington National Cemetery, the Washington Monument, the White House and the Office of Thrift Supervision -- placing as many as 50 of the origami cubes in various configurations (atop cemetery headstones, for example, or lined alongside the White House fence) and photographing them before being prompted by security personnel to pick up the paper trail and move along.

Shoshan's art -- he's performed in Atlanta, Chicago, Oahu, Hawaii, and Cologne, Germany -- sometimes includes placing coins inside the origami constructions. He sees a figurative meaning -- putting money into bombs (but the coins also keep his art from blowing away).

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Unless passersby ask him what he's up to, he keeps to himself. Time is often short before he'll be interrupted by security guards. It's okay with Shoshan, though, if his intent remains oblique: "Even though many people won't know what I'm doing, I know what I'm doing."

At the conference, however, Shoshan said he expected the freedom to perform anywhere in the hotel's meeting areas and to display his camouflage flag in a prominent place. But he arrived to find that the association wanted his flag to go in a ballroom doubling as a book exhibition hall. He suggested hanging it outside. Uh-uh, said hotel management. A hotel staffer assigned to assist Shoshan offered to hang the flag above an escalator connecting the hotel's two meeting levels. Much better, Shoshan thought.

Not so fast, said management. The flag had to go back somewhere downstairs. Shoshan felt sure it was because of the flag's political message. Jon Lockwood, the hotel's marketing director, says that wasn't the case. Shoshan hadn't gone through proper channels, Lockwood says.

Later, when Shoshan started a "Paper Bombs" performance in the meeting-level lobby, hotel staff intervened and forbade Shoshan to continue. Lockwood says the hotel was not informed by the association of Shoshan's plans: "We asked him, 'What are these?' He said, 'They're paper bombs.' We thought that was not a good idea.



New York artist Ethan Shoshan had a tough time in Washington with his camouflage-striped flag and "Paper Bombs" -- multicolored origami cubes. (By Jonathan Padget -- The Washington Post)

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We take the word 'bomb' very seriously."

At that point, Shoshan says he gave up on the conference to focus on performing elsewhere in the city.

On Sunday, as conference attendees waited to check out, several were asked what they thought of Shoshan's camouflage flag. Most said, well, they hadn't noticed it.

Davis Performing Arts Center

Georgetown University will unveil the Royden B. Davis, S.J. Performing Arts Center -- the first academic building constructed at Georgetown in 20 years -- tomorrow at an open house.

Designed primarily for use by the theater program, the Davis Center, located near the university's main gate at 37th and O streets NW, features the Gonda Theatre, a 235-seat proscenium space, and the Devine Studio Theatre, a flexible "black box" space that will seat 80 to 100. Rehearsal studios, classrooms, costume and scene shops, and faculty offices are also included in the center.

"Theater was marginalized as an academic discipline," says Maya Roth, director of the university's theater program and artistic director of the Davis Center, which she calls "a move toward putting arts at the center of the intellectual life of the university community."

The complex will be open to the public tomorrow from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. The inaugural production at the center, "Our Country's Good," opens Saturday.

For more information, call 202-687-3838 or visit <http://performingarts.georgetown.edu/davis> .

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