

How Boedekker dirt became furniture — perhaps for park

Ceramicist recycles neighborhood 'essence'

By TOM CARTER

In a conversion about as strange as making a sow's ear into a purse, how about turning Boedekker Park dirt into furniture?

That's what artist Ilana Crispi has done with dirt from the park's construction site. She made a backless, 50-inch-long, 18-inch-high bench and four 1½ foot-tall stools. The dirt furniture might go into the new clubhouse when the park's \$6 million makeover is complete next year.

Crispi wants the furniture to stay in the neighborhood. Betty Traynor, the Friends of Boedekker chair who saw the art objects Oct. 24, told *The Extra*: "It's exciting work with our own dirt. I could see it in the clubhouse. It would make sense." But that's not yet in the plans.

Crispi, who taught kids' ceramic classes at Boedekker six years ago, got her furniture-making brainstorm when reflecting on how structures change so dramatically over the years but the ground remains the same.

"The land itself stays constant," she says, "and it's the essence of the place." She wanted to make something using dirt that people could connect with, and furniture was a satisfying answer. (Unbeknownst to Crispi, an Israeli woman, Adital Ela, is doing that, pursuing a zero ecological footprint by making "Terra" stools from soil and natural fibers.)

Crispi has been making ceramic vessels and bowls out of dirt, since she lived in Los Angeles.

"It's such a green use of dirt."

Originally, she wanted to work with the dirt under Ramon's Tailor shop at 628 Jones St. where she had scheduled an exhibition. But that was a chore complicated by sewage pipes and the restrictions on the historic building.

So, using the Google satellite aerial search, she scoured the neighborhood for land that contains clay — which can be used for ceramics as well — and didn't find much.

"There is so little dirt in the Tenderloin, very few parks and backyards."

But when she discovered Boedekker Park under construction, she contacted Traynor who put her in touch with Alejandra Chiesa, the makeover project manager, and got permission to take some dirt.

"One day I found myself digging right under where I used to teach ceramics," she said.

Crispi, who teaches ceramics at San Francisco City College and art history at Skyline College, taught Intersection for the Arts ceramic programs at the park in 2007. One for kids ages 6-13 created small, kiln-fired sculptures for outside that were wired for sound and motion-activated.

Last summer, Crispi removed 7½ dozen 5-gallon buckets of dirt and took it away in a borrowed van. The ground was sand, silt, clay and gravel. It was workable stuff, but didn't have the best clay content, which geologic studies showed was 20 to 30 feet deep. She didn't go down that far, though.

"I didn't know what I'd find at Boe-



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

dekker, and it was a pretty small ratio of clay. There was also some debris."

To others, just the idea of cozying up to Tenderloin dirt was hardly enchanting, even if Crispi is an artist.

"Most people I have spoken with demonstrate a visible disgust at the idea of touching the ground here, so through this (planned) installation I'm challenging people to experience a beautiful version of this neighborhood," she wrote on the Ramon's Tailor website.

Boedekker over the decades had been a site for picnics, a theater, and, post-1906, a ballroom, dance school, skating rink and bowling alley. In its dirt she found "some bottles in pretty good shape. I've got one chip I think came from a light fixture that I'm going to use as a stamp" on ceramic vessels and bowls.

At her three studios, one in Half Moon Bay, she used scrap maple and mahogany wood to frame the bench's dirt, then, in a "puddling technique," poured on water and let it set for 21 days.

In countless tests, Crispi experimented with kiln intensity for firing ceramic objects, looking for the "sweet spot" before the dirt turned to glass. Simultaneously, she had to avoid lower temperatures that produced unacceptable "colors, textures and surfaces." Some of her pieces layer porcelain with dirt, creating a stark contrast, she says, between the "valuable — porcelain was once as valuable as gold — with the grotesque and soiled."

She presented her installation, "Tenderloin Dirt Harvest: Please be seated on the ground," Oct. 24 at Ramon's and showed again Nov. 7. It was also included in San Francisco Open Studios. Featured in her bowls are Tenderloin produce and honey raised and produced on the Glide Methodist Church roof. ■



PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA

Ilana Crispi fills big buckets of dirt from the Boeddeker Park construction site as the park undergoes its \$6 million makeover. Crispi, a ceramicist, has used the dirt to create a kiln-fired bench and four stools (examples above). The furniture could end up in the new clubhouse when the park redo is complete.

Ex-Extra reporter writes murder mystery set in TL

By TOM CARTER

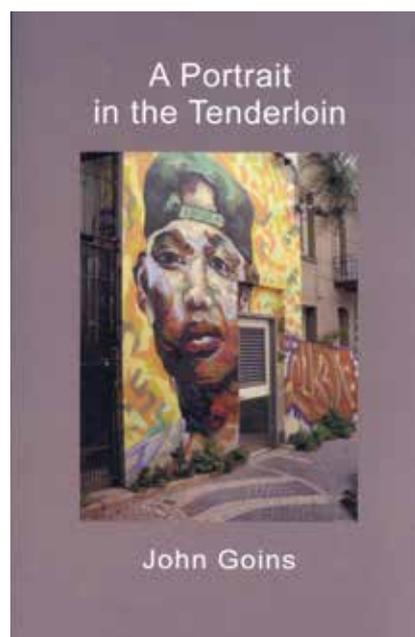
John Goins showed up unannounced at our doorstep seven years ago with notes from his interview with a Tenderloin rape victim who hadn't reported the crime. Goins was a City College student holding down a full-time job, eager to learn writing skills. We encouraged more reporting, then helped him shape his front-page story in June 2006, "Rapes Spike" in the Tenderloin.

For more than a year, Goins freelanced with *The Extra*, his stories ranging from the farmers market to dope busts. The half-dozen obits he wrote had taken him into SRO community rooms for memorials where he learned about life and death in the TL. The revelatory detail he took away he has now put to use in "A Portrait in the Tenderloin," a murder mystery novel, not to be confused with our book, "Death in the Tenderloin," a collection of select obituaries from *The Extra*.

Goins creates community reporter Bill Haywood who covers the Tenderloin and SoMa on the neighborhood newspaper, *The San Francisco Dealer*. His artsy older brother, Ralph, he never liked much in childhood and maybe less as adults. Ralph is a painter and photographer living in the Tenderloin, 6-foot-5 with mental problems, often loopy and unreliable because he shuns his meds.

But schizophrenic Ralph didn't deserve to get himself shot to death in a Golden Gate Park encampment. Haywood thinks something's fishy and feels a brotherly tie compelling him to track down the shooter, who fled. Haywood suspects a heavy motive could be involved.

Goins takes us through recogniz-



able nooks and crannies of his old haunts and out to the Panhandle and into the park's leafy enclaves, chasing leads and brushing past the cops. He's nosy enough to get cold-cocked by a preacher. Even so, it appears as if Ralph's quick shutter at the wrong time — or maybe a Cartier-Bresson right moment — got him into some deep water that has sent ripples into the mayor's election race.

Haywood artfully earns a key confession before things get settled in a dramatic Hollywood scene you won't see coming.

The novel had a book launch at Green Arcade bookstore on Market Street Sept. 25 and is published by Ithuriel's Spear Press, whose fiscal sponsor is Intersection for the Arts. It retails for \$16. ■

A holiday twofer

This is a combination December-January issue of *Central City Extra*. The holidays always make it next to impossible to produce an issue each month. This year, the challenge was compounded by Study Center's impending relocation to 1663 Mission St. The *Extra* will resume in February 2014.

CENTRAL CITY

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