

Artists find food for thought in tin towers that grace Napa gallery. It's for a good cause.

Charla Bear, Special to The Chronicle

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Picture a cityscape made up of 4,000 sardine cans stacked into towers. Then picture one of those towers collapsing.

That's what happened just after a prize-winning structure was installed at Copia's "Canstruction" exhibition in Napa.

It wasn't the first time one of the sparkling silver towers had fallen. Napa artist Gordon Huether, who created the structure, said he couldn't get the towers to stand when he tested his idea the day before the installation. "When it looked like my idea wasn't going to work I thought, 'what did I get myself into,'" said Huether.

Huether had entered "Canstruction: We CAN Build a Solution to Hunger," a food drive competition that challenges members of the design and construction industry to create structures out of cans. Through Jan. 2, Copia will present the entries created by the Society for Design Administration, which aims to draw attention to hunger issues. Structures are judged in categories, such as best in show or best use of labels. At the end of the exhibition, the temporary structures made of hundreds to thousands of cans will be dismantled and donated to food banks.

Seven teams from Northern California are on display at Copia. Sixty-five other cities are scheduled to participate, including Los Angeles and San Diego.

Competing teams must figure out how to secure unopened cans together in a structure using only fasteners such as double-sided tape or rubber bands.

Huether ultimately relied on teamwork and human ingenuity to make his structure, titled "One Sardine Is Not Enough," finally stand.

"I have a really dynamic staff here that's used to me throwing things at them. They just used logic," he said.

Huether said he came up with the idea that won best of show in "about two minutes," but some of the

other teams took two months to design and build their creations.

The team from San Francisco's Hornberger + Worstell Architects held several 90-minute meetings before deciding to recreate a Diego Rivera painting out of cans. Then it generated a three-dimensional computer model of "Cargador de Flores" (The Flower Carrier) to determine how many cans were needed. By using a typical 4 3/8-inch can height and about 23 horizontal slices through the model, the team came up with 12,000 cans.

As each team is responsible for acquiring its cans, the Hornberger + Worstell team worked with Safeway's corporate offices to get a donation of the entire quantity. But even with the huge number of cans and a computer model, they still weren't sure the structure would stand.

"We never really solved the thing until we finished at Copia. There was apprehension and uncertainty. That's what we wanted as part of the experience is to not know if this would work out," said Co Chau, who created the 3-D model.

The team also coordinated the colors of the labels, which have to remain intact, to the colors in the painting. But they did change the flowers to cans of food and the title of the piece to "Cargador de la Vida" (Carrier of Life).

Copia curator Neil Harvey said he was so pleased with the variety of structures in the exhibition that Copia will do Canstruction next year. Copia has enough gallery space, unlike typical mall venues, to allow the sculptures to stay almost two months, said Harvey.

Although there may be plenty of time to display the work, some felt there wasn't enough time for everything else.

"We'll try to start the whole process and make sure we're recruiting teams earlier. We would like to give our teams longer, and give them more time to approach wholesalers and retailers to gather the cans," he said.

Teams were successful enough to amass approximately 35,000 cans for the event. Many teams agreed more time would have benefited the projects.

The student team that created the structure Harvey called "most topical" said one of the reasons it chose the saxophone concept was "speediness of construction."

The Association of General Contractors asked its UC Berkeley student chapter to participate because students have more time than professionals, said Pedro Santos Vieira, a Ph.D. student who managed the project. But Vieira soon found that busy students could only focus on parts of the structure at a time, such as the mouthpiece or a curve in the sax's body.

The day of the exhibition, each team had 12 hours to construct the final piece. That was the first time

the students got to build their submission, "Blowing Away the Hunger Blues," in its entirety.

Even with the time constraints, participants said the project was not only for a good cause but also tested the creativity needed for their professions.

"Cal has the No. 1 civil engineering program, so we better be in there showing what can be done with only cans," Vieira said.

"Canstruction: We CAN Build a Solution to Hunger" is on display at Copia through Jan. 2. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Monday, closed Tuesday and holidays (Dec. 24, 25 and Jan. 1). General admission is \$12.50 for adults, \$10 for seniors, \$5 for youths ages 13-20, free for children 12 and younger. Discounted admission for students is \$7.50 with valid ID. 500 First St., Napa. For more information call toll-free (888) 512-6742 or go to www.copia.org.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/12/17/DDG3LG8P2J1.DTL>

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