Artists take a bit of Portland, come back with pieces of Rio

By JOSEPH GALLIVAN

The Portland art scene is constantly questioning how local it is versus how national, but for a real shake-up it's hard to match what happened in January: Six Portland artists and eight students from the Pacific Northwest College of Art went to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, as the return leg of a cultural exchange with the art gallery A Gentil Carioca.

You may remember when the

Brazilians came here in 2005. Internationally known sculptor Ernesto Neto assembled a tent of stretch nylon and sandbags in the art school's common area, while in the window Laura Lima showed live chickens decked out in colored feathers like samba dancers.

The local curators, Nan Curtis and Elana Mann, soon chose six artists, who had 18 months to think about what they would do for the exchange. They were:

Bruce Conkle, who is known for his Northwest landscapes full of Douglas firs and sasquatches.

David Eckard, who does performance/sculpture such as Float, when he drifted down the Willamette River last September on a contraption of his own making, declaring on one of his trademark megaphones.

Don Olsen, who draws.

Emily Ginsburg, whose graphic silhouettes on paper were included in the latest Oregon Biennial.

M.K. Guth, a sculptor who

David Eckard's belly images of "American tragedies" were conversation starters on the Rio de Janeiro.

COURTESY OF DAVID ECKARD
Looking at U.S. from afar

The gallery A Gentil Carioca, which means roughly "the kind person from Rio," has a casual approach to art.

"The way they run the gallery is not so divided," Eckard says. "You walk in and it's not an ice-cold cube."

The founders asked the Portlanders to do work that was "temporal and integrated into the neighborhood," he says.

Eckard built a prosthetic stomach that housed dioramas depicting "Five American tragedies, moments when America turned on itself." So for a few hours a day on five consecutive days he would stand in the street under an umbrella, with interpreters, and wait for people to check him out. The dioramas showed the history of civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963; current Ku Klux Klan activities; a lynching in Indiana in 1930; the McCarthy hearings; and the Japanese internment during World War II.

"They’d ask what was going on, then it would turn into a conversation among the onlookers, like, 'Hey, that’s how people are reflected in the favelas here,’ or a discussion about Brazil’s role in World War II."

For once Eckard found himself invisible in his own street theater.

"In Portland, when I did my Serbie thing, people would come up and go, 'Ooh what’s that?' thinking it was some weird momen...