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HUBARTS FEATURE: 'Secret Ark' docks in Charlestown



Of all the craft that have sailed into the [Charlestown Navy Yard](#) over the decades, likely none has been as strange or as personal as “The Secret Ark of Icon Park,” now docked on a bucolic lawn overlooking the [U.S.S. Constitution](#) and Boston Harbor.

A translucent blue partition in the shape of a hull contains a giant pencil and the poem it has written, painted transforming animals, a giant bottle. Its clear plastic oars are filled with balls and rolled maps, shells and feathers and beads, rice and bones. A treasure chest grows flowers. A giant gun points toward the harbor – next to a real cannon.

It’s an odd cargo this ark hauls: the personal freight of artist **Jerry Beck**, who’s also the artistic director of the [Revolving Museum](#) in Lowell, where he lives.

Beck is an interesting, obsessive guy in the way artists tend to be. The stickers on his pickup truck namecheck Al Franken – and Jesus. He says, “I’ve been very interested in dry docks for a long time,” without noticing that it’s funny.

A year ago, having long put his art on hold in favor of museum work, Beck was commissioned by the [Institute of Contemporary Art’s Vita Brevis public art program](#) and the [Boston National Historical Park](#) to create a public art work at the facility, which has been designated a “national icon park” – i.e. a potential terrorist target – due to the presence of the Constitution and the World War II destroyer the U.S.S. Cassin.

“When I came here the first thing I noticed was the military presence ... so I was sitting here and thinking a whole bunch of things, and one was I was very upset about the war and what was going on in the country,” Beck said Wednesday, sitting on the waterfront. “I started to be more political than I’ve ever been – very upset, and feeling anger and a lot of emotional catharsis happening. So I kind of felt I needed to create my own boat, you know?”

The marine/carnival iconography he chose was highly personal, from his work with kids at the museum – and the toll violence has taken on some of them – to his childhood memories.



“Growing up in South Florida near the water, it’s just like something that I always made when I was a kid. I was always going on boats, making boats, military boats, out of wood and nails,” Beck said. “Plus South Florida is the theme park capital of the world. Right down the street from me we had Pirate’s World, this fantasy park built in the middle of a swamp.”

The national park is a theme attraction too, he notes.

“I always thought when you were in a white-wall gallery you’re protected, it’s kind of a pristine space, there’s no spontaneity. There people know what to expect. But when you’re in a public space, it’s an adventure,” Beck said.

“First, people come here from all over the world, and secondly, you watch how people respond to these things, kids are running toward the guns and they’re acting out war, POW POW POW. That’s what I used to do as a kid, I spent hours and hours and hours playing war games, and I realized that’s how we are conditioned by this whole militaristic society and the media... desensitized to the violence.”

Already, even while the piece is being finished before its Saturday opening, one tourist has complained to a park ranger about its anti-war slant. Although Beck says that’s not exactly its intent, he smiles at the anecdote.

“If it’s not controversial, I’m not successful, right?”

The ark opens Saturday from 2-4 p.m. and is free to the public. It will be on display through Oct. 10. And here's a HubArt.com exclusive: Right-click this link and [download beck_audio.WMA](#) to hear Jerry Beck welcome you to “The Secret Ark of Icon Park.” The background sound is the wind in advance of Wednesday’s thunderstorms.

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