

Tinkerer, Bailer, Sculptor, Sailor, And Now What?

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Nobuhiru Yamauchi prefers to be called simply Yama. He likes simplicity — every day for three years, he has been stepping off his 21-foot sailboat, which is laden with his sculpture and paintings and moored at the 79th Street docks, and walking the 10 feet to his workplace: the lineup of wooden sculptures against the fence.

But lately, things have been getting more and more complicated. First, a former dockmaster had 20 of his pieces removed from the boat basin parking garage and dumped. Then, he received a letter dated March 23 in which the Riverside Park administrator, Charles McKinney, gave him two weeks to remove his work — or see it thrown out.

On Thursday — a full week short of the deadline — Mr. McKinney and a sheriff, armed with truck and staff, removed the remainder of his works, over 30 of them, to be taken to a Parks Department storage area on 105th Street.

“I spoke to him yesterday afternoon,” Yama said calmly, in his thick Japanese accent. He was standing on his boat Thursday afternoon, staring at his empty work

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Carol Halebian for The New York Times

Nobuhiru Yamauchi, before his sculptures were seized by Riverside Park officials.

space. “He didn’t say anything about a change in the deadline.”

Mr. McKinney seems to have acted out of exasperation. “When I spoke to him last night,” Mr. McKinney said Thursday evening, “it was apparent that he had not yet arranged to move it himself.” When asked why the objects were removed before

the deadline, he sighed and said, “I’ve been cooperative with him, but now he’s making it difficult.”

Yama, who came to the United States in 1980, is no stranger to adversity or adventure. He said he once sailed a 27-foot sailboat alone from New York, through the Panama Canal, to Tahiti using only a compass. He

was then featured in the local paper there when his boat shipwrecked off a beach. He has since tried to sail his present home, a 21-foot sailboat, to Portugal. Ten days into the journey, he said, storms pounded his craft and destroyed his rudder. He fashioned a substitute out of one of the boat’s hatches and returned, bailing water all the way.

“This boat is too slow,” he explained. “It only travels 30 miles a day.” He is quick to add that his is not a capitalist venture, and he practically discourages anyone who tries to hawk his work to others. “I am not working for money. This is not commercial.”

His pieces, which resemble Polynesian totem poles, adorn many of the boats in the boat basin, where Yama has lived for five years and where he is a popular figure. The current dockmaster, Ron Boudreau, hugged him earlier last week, declaring, “We love this guy, I have the first painting he did in New York.”

On the subject of his style, Yama dismisses comparisons to other types of art. “I am influenced by nature,” he said. He says he has never been to a museum and does not look at other artists’ work. “I like the sun and I am influenced by nature. I let the chisel follow the grain of the wood.”

But what he’s going to do next is not clear. Looking a little out of place without his chisel in his hand, he stood on the dock and smiled feebly. “Maybe I’ll take up painting.”

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