

Los Angeles Times

The Guide

January 24, 2008
WITH THE KIDS

Good, twisted fun with balloons

By Brenda Rees
Special to the Times

THE little boy didn't want a balloon hat.

"How about a balloon motorcycle?" suggests balloon twister extraordinaire Addi Somekh, who snaps out a few balloons from the hundreds that adorn his handmade balloon apron.

The boy nods and in the blink of an eye Somekh inflates two long sausage-shaped balloons, twists and stuffs them, weaves in another balloon and finally presents the enraptured boy with an intricate, inflated, latex Harley-Davidson.

A little girl pipes up: "Can I have a pink princess crown? Please?"

As Somekh works the crowd, the faces of adults and children light up.

"A balloon hat can make instant friends," Somekh says, explaining the universal appeal of the colorful headdresses that are equal parts silly playthings and artistic creations. "I've learned that it doesn't take much to make people happy."

Sharing tricks of the balloon twisters' trade, Somekh will lead a series of hourlong workshops Sunday and again on March 2 at the Skirball Cultural Center, where "The Inflatable Crown," a photo and media exhibition of his balloon hat handiwork, is on display.

"Crown" chronicles Somekh and New York photographer Charlie Eckert's four-year odyssey traveling the world, making balloon hats for people from Mongolia to Wyoming.

More than 70 photos and a filmed documentary are on exhibit.

And during the workshops, a slide show of some of Eckert's 10,000 photographs from the expeditions may inspire attendees to strive for balloon art greatness.

A self-taught balloon twister, Somekh made a living in New York by creating balloon flowers, hats and other items for restaurant customers. He refined his techniques during his balloon hat travels, fashioning crazy rainbow toppers for Norwegian soldiers, swirly helmets for East L.A. roadsters and Martian tiaras for Thailand youth.

According to Somekh, the hardest thing for beginners is the blowing. "It took me at least three months to figure that out," he says. "It's all lip strength. It's the same for musicians who play wind instruments."

Somekh recommends that novice twisters invest in a handy pump for inflation and forgo lip blowing. The fun part of balloon creations, he says, "is learning the twists and weaves. [At the workshops] we'll start out with the simple things, like flowers using the big balloons, and we'll

work up from there."

What about the potential popping?

Get used to it, Somekh instructs.

Beyond the physical act of making balloon art, good twisters also have to convey a sense of dignity to their subjects because, says Somekh, "No one wants to wear a balloon hat if it makes them look like an idiot. If a balloon hat is done well, it makes the wearer stand taller. It's the ultimate wordless compliment."

GLOBALLOONACY WORKSHOP

WHERE: Skirball Cultural Center, 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., L.A.

WHEN: 11:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. Sun. (sold out); also March 2, 11:30 a.m.

PRICE: \$15 adults, \$10 kids

INFO: (310) 440-4500