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ART

At Burning Man, Art Is Now More Permanent Than Perishable

The gathering has become an art event, with works and large installations that have a long shelf life

By Brenda Cronin

March 24, 2018 11:18 a.m. ET

The robots, monsters and other harum-scarum works of art at Burning Man aren't all destined for a pyre at the annual conclave in Nevada's Black Rock Desert. Some are heading to public parks, music festivals and museum exhibitions.

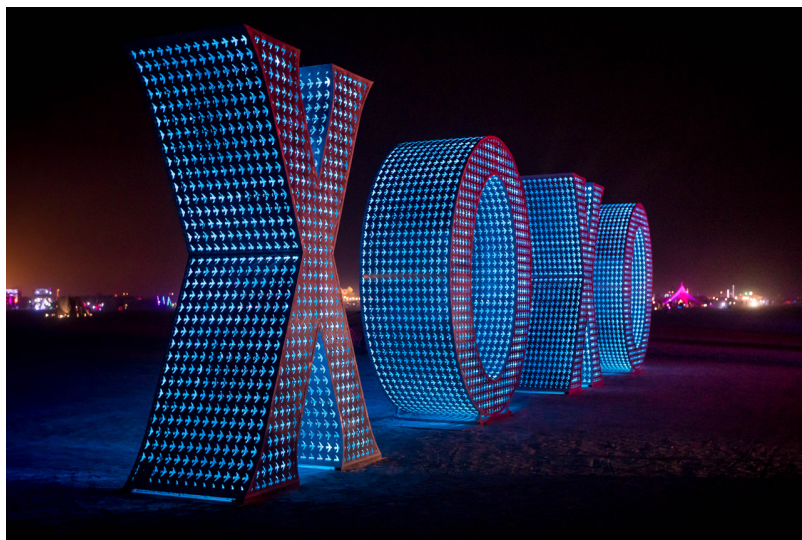
Over the next few weeks, Burning Man installations will go up in a San Francisco park and at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.

Burning Man has evolved from a bacchanal into a major art event, says Laura Kimpton, an artist who has participated in the Nevada gathering since 2003. "You don't see many naked people anymore," she says. "It's a five-mile-by-five-mile, no money, no schmoozing, crazy party. It just used to be 'Mad Max,' and now it's a rave."

Last year's event drew about 75,000 people—and 317 works of art—to the sere, chalky landscape. The Burning Man installations are social-media catnip, bringing artists renown beyond Black Rock City, the temporary metropolis assembled every year in an ancient lake bed in the desert. In keeping with the event's founding principles, including "decommodification," no art sales or deals are made at the gathering, which starts this year on Aug. 26 and runs for several days.

Most installations are assembled by teams of people. The works have to be sturdy enough to withstand arid, windy conditions—as well as participants who treat some pieces like jungle gyms. Some artwork features pyrotechnics, fire or LED lights. (Burning Man began in 1986, when two friends built and burned a wooden figure before a crowd gathered on San Francisco's Baker Beach.)

"No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man," which opens March 30 at the Renwick, highlights 20



Artist Laura Kimpton has taken part in Burning Man since 2003, with works like 'XOXO,' an installation with Jeff Schomberg at last year's gathering. PHOTO: SCOTT LONDON

installations—14 in the museum and six sprinkled throughout the surrounding neighborhood. The show features both past works and brand-new commissions, and includes artists such as Leo Villareal, who built a grid of strobe lights at the gathering in 1997 and now is working on a project in London to illuminate more than a dozen bridges across the Thames.

“There’s a rich history and a rich tradition of artists...gravitating to extreme environments like the desert to really be able to create new art works,” says Ann Wolfe, senior curator and deputy director of the Nevada Museum of Art.

The Renwick exhibition includes much of the Nevada Museum’s “City of Dust: The Evolution of Burning Man,” which closed in January.

Last year, another exhibition, “The Art of Burning Man,” drew a record number of visitors—many in costume—to its opening at the Hermitage Museum and Gardens in Norfolk, Va., says Executive Director Jen Duncan. The Hermitage displayed a dozen Burning Man works in the museum and across its 12.5-acre site.

Ms. Duncan got the idea for the show in 2015, when her son said he wanted to go to Burning Man. Initially, she says, “I thought to myself: Burning Man? What the heck is that? A bunch of hippies in the desert.” But as she and her colleagues assembled their exhibit, they realized: “we had barely touched the surface of an entirely new group of artists that we need to explore.”

Some Burning Man artists are taking an unorthodox approach to their careers, Ms. Duncan says. Instead of “struggling to find a gallery to represent them, put their stuff up and...have small shows,” she says, “they’re just coming up with an idea, building it and putting it in front of” 75,000 people.

Works from two of these artists will share a two-year installation at a park in San Francisco's Hayes Valley neighborhood beginning in May. Under the auspices of the San Francisco Arts Commission, the park has hosted works by other Burning Man veterans such as David Best and the collective HYBYCOZO in recent years.

Next up is Charles Gadeken, who will install "Squared," a 50-foot, steel obelisk bedizened with 768 mesmerizing polyurethane cubes that change color, thanks to 15,000 individually adjustable LEDs. In 2019, "Squared" will be succeeded by Dana Albany's "Tara Mechani," a 15-foot, mixed-metal sculpture of a glowing woman with a lit chandelier inside her torso. The work, which was at Burning Man last year, will be in the park into 2020.

Ms. Albany didn't formally train as an artist. But after her first Burning Man in 1994, she decided to build a life-size camel from wood, chicken wire and papier-mâché. The camel took over most of the tiny apartment she was renting in an old San Francisco Victorian house, Ms. Albany recalls. Setting fire to the work at Burning Man "was actually kind of liberating and exciting," she says. "As an artist, you never feel done with your work. And so it was a wonderful release."

When Mr. Gadeken started going to Burning Man, about 25 years ago, he painted enormous pictures, which he would hang and set aflame. That led him to "fire art"—creating works such as a huge steel tree with balls of fire at the end of its branches—and ultimately to LEDs. Fire art is "beautiful and it's interesting, but it had very little future," he says. LEDs were safer, more affordable and enduring. In 2014, Mr. Gadeken installed "Squared" at Burning Man and built a version of the work for Coachella, the music festival in Indio, Calif.

Mr. Gadeken has exhibited in galleries but says he finds them constraining compared with Burning Man's unlimited possibilities. A gallery "needs you to generate an identity that they can continue to market," he says. "I just want to move on and do something else."

Ms. Kimpton, the artist, says she had been showing in galleries long before going to Burning Man, and continues to keep a hand in both worlds. Her most recent solo show was last year at HG Contemporary, in New York. As an artist at Burning Man, Ms. Kimpton says, "you're not thinking about whether it's going to be sold. When you're at gallery openings, all you are thinking about is if there's a red dot" on the work's label, signaling it has found a buyer.

Burning Man Arts, a program of the nonprofit Burning Man organization, recently announced grants for 76 projects this year, with an average amount of \$20,000. Mr. Gadeken and Ms. Albany were among the recipients. So was Jessica Levine, a 24-year-old substitute teacher in South Lake Tahoe, Nev., who first went to Burning Man in 2013. She received a grant last year to build "Reaching Through," an 11-foot-tall steel sculpture.



Leo Villareal's 'Volume (Renwick)' (2015). PHOTO: © LEO VILLAREAL/CONNERSMITH/RENEWICK GALLERY/RON BLUNT (PHOTO)



Dana Albany's 'Tara Mechani,' which was at Burning Man last year, will be installed at a park in San Francisco's Hayes Valley neighborhood in 2019. PHOTO: TREY RATCLIFF

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Ms. Levine says she will put this year's funding toward "FloBot," a "flowerlike steel sculpture" with an abstract blossom for a head, set atop a tangle of roots. Visitors will



Jessica Levine received a Burning Man Arts grant last year to build her steel sculpture 'Reaching Through,' which she hopes to outdo at this year's gathering. PHOTO: JESSICA LEVINE

be able to climb into the new work, which is "a lot more ambitious" than "Reaching Through," Ms. Levine says.

Burning Man officials say the growing fame of artists at the event doesn't contravene the community's principles. "We celebrate when that happens for them," says Katie Hazard, program manager of Burning Man Arts. "The more art, the better."

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