

San Francisco Chronicle
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style

The art of Burning Man
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COVER STORY

BIG IDEAS SPARK BIG ART

By Carolyn Zinko

To the uninitiated, the Burning Man festival in Nevada's Black Rock Desert is part rave, part craft fair gone awry. To devotees, Burning Man is something bigger: A weeklong exercise in consciousness-raising, spurred by colossal artworks set amid a sprawling campground where 70,000 visitors collaborate to survive.

If you focus on the dance parties, embellished nudity, drugs and the burning of a wooden effigy at the end of the event, it's easy to overlook that the festival is actually centered on art. A new coffee-table tome, "Burning Man: Art on Fire" (Race Point Publishing, 208 pages), by San Francisco's Jennifer Raiser (photo inset), showcases ingenious, breathtaking and downright wacky installations by amateur and professional artists from around the globe, with color photographs by Sidney Erthal and Scott London and descriptions of the works in the artists' own words. (The introduction is written by Burning Man founder Larry Harvey.)

The book hits stores this week and should give those who've never attended Burning Man a newfound appreciation for the gathering, if not the way artists use the wide-open playa as a metaphor for the infinite possibilities of the imagination. Burning Man occurs Aug. 25 to Sept. 1 this year, but armchair travelers will find plenty to explore from home. Raiser, a retired businesswoman and Harvard MBA, is treasurer of Burning Man Project, the nonprofit that runs the festival. She discussed the book with Style.

Q: How did someone who managed senior care communities end up at Burning Man?

A: I sold my business and then my best friend from high school, with whom I'd gone to Harvard, convinced me I would love it. I went for the first time in 2006. About 15 minutes into it, I said, "Why have you been keeping this from me my whole life?" The open-heartedness, the sense of playfulness, the costumes and the gifting captivated me. The spirit of inclusiveness said to me that this is how people want to be and are afraid to be most of the time.

Q: What do you make of the artwork at Burning Man?

A: Everything is dwarfed by nature — the desert is so big and the mountains are so big. No matter how big the art is, it's minuscule compared to nature and how big the universe is. And that puts the human experience into extreme context: We're so small. Collaboration and cooperation are essential. This is the reset button for consciousness, which is why people go every year.

Q: How do some of the artists use their work as social commentary?

A: Kate Raudenbush has a piece on page 29 that's a re-creation of the dome of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., rendered in Native American imagery. Her premise was: What if the Native American peoples had defined the government structure? Inside the dome are Plexiglas steps with quotes from Indian chiefs. You look at it and think, "It's a gazebo" or "It's a wedding chapel," but it's a powerful statement about who we are as a nation and a culture. The theme of Burning Man that year was "American Dream."

Q: Are most of the artists from California?

A: The majority are, because Burning Man is here. Zac Carroll's "Front Porch," on page 77, is a building from which he served moonshine and chocolate chip cookies. He's a Mill Valley carpenter. Duane Flatno's "El Pulpo Mecanico" on page 79 shows his mechanical octopus. He's from Humboldt County and uses scrap aluminum from thrift shops and the dump — muffin tins, colanders, pie pans, rusted garbage cans. Burning Man gives them a place for expression and exposure to a wider audience. And for Duane, repurposing is part of his art. If he had to buy materials, he'd have to get a sponsor.

Q: What do you want people to get out of the book?

A: A sense of their own creativity — that anyone can be an artist. And an appreciation for the gift artists bring when they create, which is under-recognized. Would van Gogh have been a Burner? Maybe. At the time, everyone thought he was crazy for not creating according to expected norms and listening to his own inner direction. Not all Burning Man art is great art, and that's OK. It's about creation, and if the end product is superlative, that's wonderful. It's the process of creation, collaboration and participation that really matters.

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Burning Man's most sacred space is the Temple, the festival's annual homage to the spiritual, which goes up in flames. The "Temple of Transition" (2011), constructed by International Arts Megacrew, was one such structure.

Laura Kimpton stands in front of "Ego" from her "Word Series." The artist uses words to reference her dyslexia. "Ego" is three 20-foot-tall letters faced with trophies, toys and other detritus and then painted gold.



"Burning Man: Art on Fire," by Jennifer Raiser, with photography by Sidney Erthal and Scott London (Race Point Publishing, 2014); \$35.

Photos by Scott London / Race Point Publishing; inset photo of Raiser by Sidney Erthal



Warmbaby, an architectural design collective in the United Kingdom, uses LED rope lights, umbrellas, audio components and steel tension wires in their sculpture titled "The Wet Dream," meant to evoke a welcoming English rain.



Dutch artist Dadara's "Transformoney Tree," wood, paper and plaster. The wooden tree sprouts decorative currency with artistic, rather than monetary, value and pairs with the artist's bankers, left.

Dadara's "bankers" are part of the "Transformoney Tree" installation. Sporting traditional umbrellas and attaches, their ensembles nonetheless transition from suit and tie to painter's overalls at the bottom.