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Photos by William Binzen

“Black Rock Hot Springs — Blessed by Water Sprites and Submerged Neon — Commencing Desert Siteworks, 1992,” 24 by 30 inches, shot on 8-by-10 film.

Photographer helped turn the focus of Burning Man toward art in 1990s

By Jessica Zack

In many of William Binzen’s photographs of Burning Man artists and revelers from the early ’90s, when the fledgling desert event drew hundreds, not yet tens of thousands, of people to Nevada’s Black Rock Desert, his camera seems to hover above the participants, somewhere between human perspective and a bird’s-eye view.

“I was the only one carting around the playa a stepladder and giant 8-foot tripod,” says Binzen, 68, who photographed Burning Man with his medium-format and 8x10 view cameras for 21 years beginning in 1990. “I pulled everything in an oversized trailer behind my bicycle, along with my backpack, clothes

William Binzen: Waking Dream: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; noon-5 p.m. Saturday. Through Aug. 27. Smith Andersen North Gallery, 20 Greenfield Ave., San Anselmo. (415) 455-9733. www.smithandersennorth.com/home

A Panel Discussion on the Intersection of Art + Environment as a Catalyst for Personal Change and Transformation: Moderator Anne Veh, an independent curator, will moderate the panel featuring William Binzen, John Law and Stefan Kirkeby. 7 p.m. July 29.

and water. When I saw something captivating, I'd start setting everything up and look from above for what Henri Cartier-Bresson called that 'decisive moment.'

Highlights from Binzen's color-saturated, often semi-surreal Burning Man portfolio, as well as shots from his influential Desert Site-works project (1992-94) are on view in the exhibition "William Binzen: Waking Dream" at Smith Andersen North Gallery.

Binzen and his wife, Nancy, have lived in a wooden dome-shaped house in the West Marin hills since they built it by hand after Binzen received his master's degree in fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute.

On a recent visit to his home studio, reached from the road via a steep footpath that winds past a cluster of sheep and a massive hillside trampoline, Binzen explained that "a lot of work went into every shot in the exhibition, and also a degree of risk-taking since I was very selective, sometimes using two or three exposures over a 24-hour period on a single sheet of film. It was nothing like what people do now, out there snapping away with their digital cameras and smartphones."

Although his name is not as well known as Burning Man co-founders Larry Harvey, Michael Mikel or John Law, Binzen played an important role in helping transform Burning Man. It went from what he remembers being "a weekend camping party with a lot of beer and guns" into a weeklong,



globally acclaimed art-centric celebration.

He is a fervent believer in "art for the purpose of community building and self-transformation, art with an inherently spiritual purpose, not just entertainment or display."

In 1992, Binzen, a lifelong lover of the wide-open "tabula rasa

character" of the desert, invited 20 fellow artists, many recruited during San Francisco Open Studios, to join him for a summer solstice art-making adventure at a hot springs near the site of Burning Man. By 1994, the number of artists had grown to 100.

For three summers, these Desert Site-works

"Cerberus and the Styx Shift," from 1996, shot on medium-format film by William Binzen, left.

events inspired architectonic sculpture, ritual performance and collaborative earthworks (such as a massive "Celtic Endless Knot" sand drawing, photographed by Binzen as people roamed the terrain with torches) — all ephemeral desert happenings, yet captured by Binzen's camera.

"I always wore two hats," Binzen recalls. He experienced everything as a participant, but stayed vigilant for "moments to transcend documentary mode and achieve a kind of metaphoric storytelling."

"I talked with Larry (Harvey) for two years, frequently on this couch until late at night, about scores of ideas I was gathering from Desert

Site-works about all the art projects we could do in the desert," says Binzen, who is also a poet and improvisational jazz musician. "He listened, and we started steering Burning Man along those lines."

"William is one of the important missing links in Burning Man history," said Law at the exhibition's opening-night reception. "It simply wasn't an artist-driven event before William's Desert Site-works, which few people know about because he is so modest and hasn't promoted his impact."

Many astonished visitors to the San Anselmo gallery ask if the uncommonly vivid images — many of which were

shot more than 20 years ago but only recently scanned, elaborately processed and printed — are in fact projections. ("People always ask if they're Duratrans light box displays," says Nancy.)

"The color effects are very deliberately arrived at," says Binzen. An admirer of Surrealism, Dada and conceptual art, he became fascinated with "color theory and how to create glow through retinal effects" while a student at SFAI. Using Adobe Photoshop, he creates up to 40 or 50 layers in each new image, "accentuating the effects of having complementary colors in close proximity to each other."

His textured skies and otherworldly expanses of sand are achieved by painting on glass, "using a variety of oil and aqueous media, hair gel, all sorts of things," he explains, and then shooting the results.

"I've always asked myself, 'How can I convey someone's inner experience within a two-dimensional image?'" says Binzen.

In August, he will return to Burning Man after missing it for the last five years because of illness.

"The camera captures the outward experience, what actually appeared before the lens," he says, "but the inner emotions — how we feel, what it means to us, how it motivates us — all of that comes through pattern and texture and color that I add."

Jessica Zack is a freelance writer who frequently covers art and film for The San Francisco Chronicle.