



# Woodacre photographer captures Burning Man's 'missing chapter'



"I liked their attitude," says Woodacre resident William Binzen of "Cerberus & the Styx Shift," shot at Burning Man during the '90s. Photo by William Binzen

By Vicki Larson, Marin Independent Journal

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For someone who was the artistic catalyst of the event that fueled the creation of Burning Man, William Binzen doesn't sound all that nostalgic for the annual festival's early days.

True, it's not the same as it was in the '90s, the Woodacre resident says. How can it be when it has grown from a handful of artist-participants to a mass-market event attracting some 70,000 people, mostly voyeurs, and when ticket sales go toward sponsoring top-tier art projects?

Still, the philosophy behind it hasn't changed, Binzen says — the desire to see collaborative art as life and a conduit for transformation.

Binzen not only envisioned what that would look like, but also created art himself while capturing the excitement, movement and expression of the festival as a photographer.

"I was the original serious art and professional photographer at Burning Man, and the only one in 1990," says Binzen, 68, a longtime professional photographer.

Nineteen of Binzen's photographs from Desert Siteworks — the festival's precursor and a site-specific art event that he conceived, directed and co-produced — through Burning Man's first 21 years are on display at Smith Andersen North Gallery in San Anselmo from Saturday through Aug. 27.

It's the first time many of the photos have been seen in public.

## MISSING CHAPTER

"This is the missing chapter in the story, which is how Burning Man got inspired for making art as a centerpiece of the experience," he says. "We (Desert Siteworks) directly and indirectly for a number of years provided inspiration and ideas and, I would say, artistic products to Burning Man."

It was, he says, a gift. And his photography captures it.

"William Binzen's images of Burning Man are the most complex and lovingly conjured of this highly photogenic event," writes John Law, Burning Man co-founder and co-editor of "Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society," in an essay accompanying the exhibit. "Binzen's writings and carefully, lovingly designed philosophies thoroughly informed the 'life as art' and 'radical self expression and inclusion' concepts that lie at the heart of early Burning Man and continue today."

Binzen "uses color in such a masterful way that the images seem to glow with their own inner light and luminous atmosphere," says Rich Van Gogh, owner of Liberty Fine Art Gallery in Reno, who presented the first solo show of some of the photographs.

His photographs are not the works of a documentarian, however. Rather they are manipulated, sometimes with paint, or multiple exposures taken over the course of several hours, or are composites to, as he says, capture the "fantasy, magical realism and surreal juxtapositions that express the pulsating ethos of Burning Man; the time-warped, psychic, conceptual and altered-state nexus of spaces through which we burners drift on the playa."



They push the envelope beyond the documentary, says Binzen, who frequently uses an 8-by-10 large-format camera and even the Brownie Hawkeye he got when he was 7 years old.

"He is and has always been recognized as an artist who was using a camera as opposed to a documentarian," his wife, Nancy, notes.

## AT THE BEGINNING

Binzen heard about Burning Man when it was just a small summer solstice gathering during which participants burned an effigy of a man on San Francisco's Baker Beach.

But when he showed up in 1990, three years after the first gathering, police surrounded the handful of participants and there was no burn.

Wondering who was in charge, Binzen asked and was directed to Larry Harvey. Binzen introduced himself and that was the beginning of their relationship and exchange of ideas that helped inform the Burning Man most people know.

Binzen, who had been to Nevada's Black Rock desert in 1977, saw it as a place where they could move the party and where burners could fly below the radar. He also saw it as a place where the gathering could be more than just a "weekend tailgate party," but an inspiring location to create art.

Joining with the Cacophony Society, a loose network of pranksters and free spirits, about two dozen artist-participants created Desert Siteworks in 1992, '93 and '94 and the rest, as Binzen says, is history.

"I saw the potential because I've always been interested in making art and having performative-type events in desert places, that would be stripped of the accoutrements of civilization and where we could sort of reinvent ourselves ... suspend the rules of life as we knew it so we could be wild and free," Binzen says. "We went to the desert to pursue a vision of how we can transform our normal lives through going through these rather radical experiences in remote, isolated and difficult locations in the desert."

## HOPEFUL TO RETURN

Prostate cancer has kept Binzen from attending Burning Man for the past five years. He hopes to make it there this year.

He knows it will be a lot different than in its nascent days.

"I and probably, I hate to use the term, old-timers, who were there at the inception or the early years would probably agree. It's become a mass-market event and with that there are issues, lots and lots of issues. But it's just simply that it's grown. There's no question it is the most remarkable, large-scale, outdoor gathering event-cum-party on the planet," he says.

But what attracted him to it in the early days is still there, he says, especially the art and sense of community at the theme camps.

He hopes that's what people who see his photography experience, too.

"I wanted to express the inner experience of someone who was at Burning Man or my own inner experiences through the way I deal with color and form that transform the photograph from being merely documentary to being something that is more like a Rorschach that you stare at and observe and then allow yourself to daydream," he says.

"I hope people will simply be blown away by them and after that, think about what it all means."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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