GALLERY NOTES

A Tribe of Artists: Costumes and Culture at Burning Man is organized by the Nevada Arts Council, a division of the Department of Cultural Affairs. This exhibit is featured in the Nevada Touring Initiative Program and is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Nevada State Legislature.

A Tribe of Artists

Costumes and Culture at Burning Man

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Front Cover:

Elkhorn Girl, 2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
24" x 48"

Kitty Boy, 2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
24" x 48"

The Burning Man Art Festival is held over Labor Day weekend in the Black Rock desert north of Gerlach, Nevada. Drawing 50,000 participants from around the world, Burning Man is the largest art gathering held in Nevada and is known for its fire displays, sculptures, theme camps and its unusually attired participants. The event takes place on an ancient lake bed, known as the playa. Called "Black Rock City" this unique metropolis has a dress (and undress) code all its own. These outfits range from the minimal to extravagant, but all express the unique point of view of each participant's creative vision. »

A Tribe of Artists: Costumes and Culture at Burning Man features photographs and mannequins documenting the costumes of Burning Man, and is based on an exhibit organized by Geoffrey Nelson for the Nevada Museum of Art in 2007. Nelson photographs Burning Man attendees in a portable, tent-like studio that he transports and constructs on the desert playa. The photos were primarily shot in a portable photographic studio set up at Burning Man events from 2005-2006. Dealing with the challenging environment, including dust storms and extreme heat, Nelson photographed over 200 participants. From this came the exhibit of 14 life-sized photos and three mannequins dressed in "burner wear". Although it is truly impossible to capture the Burning Man experience within the walls of a gallery, Nelson's installation celebrates the creativity and spirited energy generated by this internationally renowned gathering. »

Golfers, 2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
36" x 36"

Paul, 2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
24" x 48"

Piper and Daughter,
2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
24" x 48"

A Tribe of Artists: Costumes and Culture at Burning Man is traveling to communities throughout the state of Nevada, and is part of the Nevada Touring Initiative (NTI). NTI features two components–the Traveling Exhibition Program and the Tumblewords Program. These programs are designed to increase access to visual arts exhibitions and writers residencies at the local level.

Big Helmet, 2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
24" x 48"

Reno Housewives,
2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
36" x 36"

Costumes: Creativity and Connectivity

by Geoffrey Nelson

Costumes came to Burning Man many years back when the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a San Francisco transvestite group posing as a nunnery, came to the traditional pre-burn cocktail party dressed in enough glitter and make-up to make even Liberace blush. Something clicked in many of the onlooker's minds, and from then on costumes have been an integral part of Burning Man. »

Shaman Randall,
2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
24" x 48"

Black Rock City is created by its participants, and one way to create a distinctive community is by the way one dresses. The title of this series "A Tribe of Artists" came from the realization that everyone, whether software engineer or waitress, can be an artist out on the playa for one week of the year. Unique outfits are celebrated and every year there is something bigger and better or smaller and flashier. The outfits become walking art pieces that express the creativity of the individual who made them. They are not costumes in the traditional sense of trying to look like a pirate or a French maid, but are expressions of uniqueness. In fact many people feel that after a week at Burning Man, putting on street clothes feels like wearing a costume. »

J. Ostuni, 2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
24" x 48"

Matching Couple,
2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
24" x 48"

The clothes at Burning Man are also seen as gifts to the rest of the inhabitants of the city, in the same way that the art or theme camps are. To see a group of people lit in electroluminescent wire and flashing LED outfits while walking down the Esplanade at night is a truly unique Burning Man experience.

The design, buying and construction of the outfits connect people throughout the year as one gets ready for a week on the playa. It is like preparing for fashion week in New York or Paris but in this case you are the fashion. »

Cody, 2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
24" x 48"

It is also part of the ritual of the day in Black Rock City to use the early evening hours to switch from a daytime outfit, that keeps you cool in the blazing heat of the playa, to one that is appropriate to a night on-the-town when that town is the high desert. People congregate at their camps after dinner and make the elaborate preparations that are required to see and be seen in such an art obsessed town.

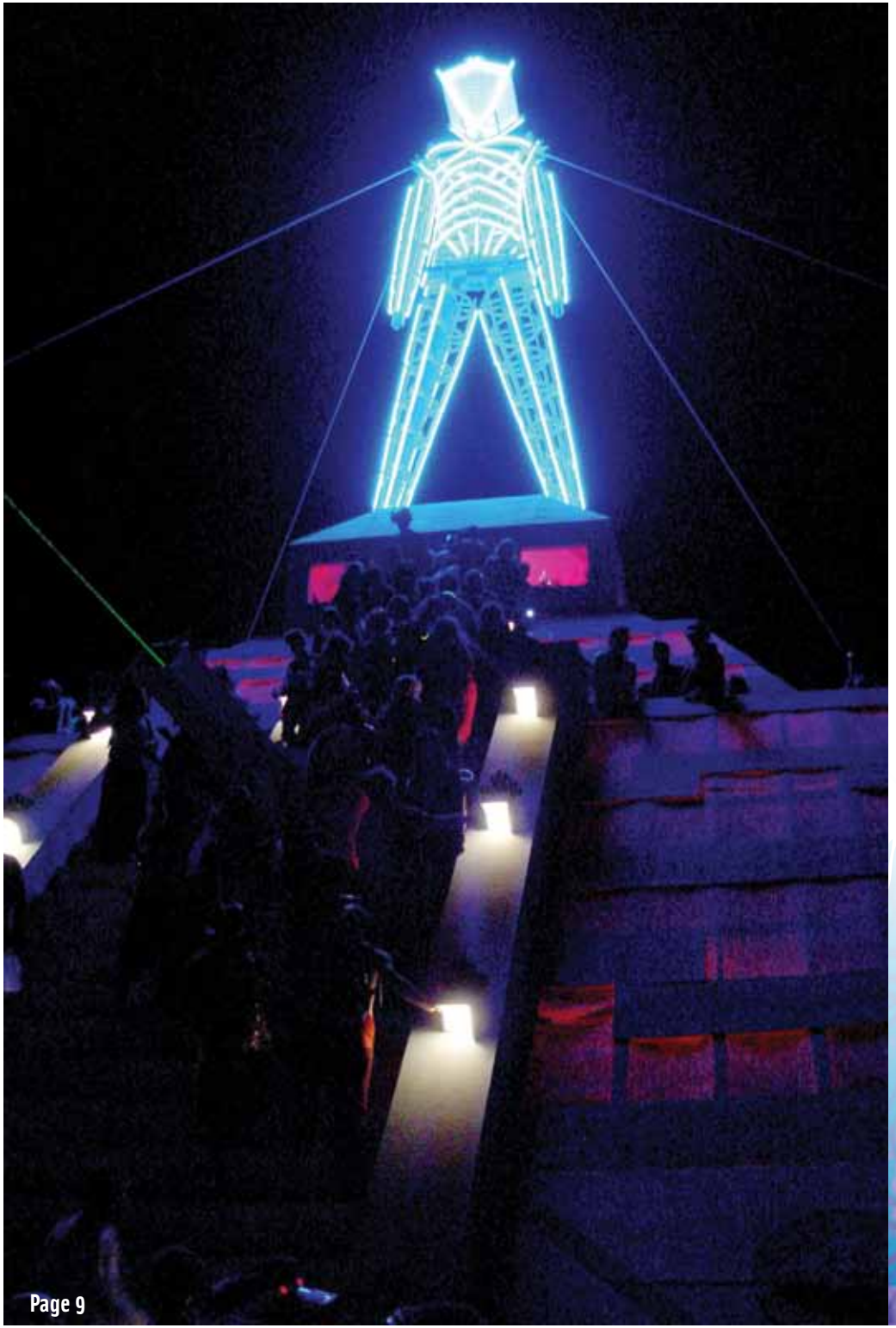
Lady Bee, 2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
24" x 48"

Claudia, 2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
24" x 48"

About the Artist

Geoffrey Nelson has been a professional photographer for over thirty years. He graduated from the University of California, Berkeley and started his professional career in the Bay area. Nelson currently resides in Incline Village, Nevada and Santa Cruz, California. He has exhibited his work nationwide, including a solo show at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno entitled, "A Tribe of Artists." His most recent book was published in 2000, "Les Anges Nus," which illuminated images of mythical creatures. Nelson has been attending the Burning Man festival for the past ten years and started his own theme camp that he named, "Mohammed's Mini Martini and Erotica Camp" six years ago. His newest project, "Deadman's Curve" documents the Memento Moris on Nevada's rural highways. He also serves on the advisory board of the Black Rock Arts Foundation.

Fran, 2005–2006
Geoffrey Nelson
Digital Photograph
24" x 48"



The Man at Night, 2003
Dan Adams
Digital Photograph

The Burning Man Festival

Burning Man began in 1986 as a congregation of about 10 people on San Francisco, California's Baker Beach. Without any permission, Larry Harvey, Jerry James and a few friends started a bonfire ritual on the summer solstice, June 21st, by burning an 8-foot tall wooden man. The name Burning Man came from the ritual of burning this large wooden effigy. Yet the inspiration for this event was something so much more; it was to mark a spontaneous act of radical self-expression, of radical self-reliance and community. After four years of erecting The Man at Baker's Beach, in 1990 the park police finally got wind of the event and shut it down on the premise that it was a potential fire hazard. This was the defining moment when Burning Man was transported to the remote and often harsh terrain of Nevada's Black Rock Desert.

The first year Burning Man was held at the Black Rock Desert, numbers decreased from roughly 400 to 80 participants, all of which were urbanites, "children of the city used to running water, TV and buying groceries at the local convenience store." Little did they know they were about to embark upon a journey into an uncharted, "desolate and stark region of primitive expanse with wild weather and days of 100+ degrees of sun-baked landscape." The Black Rock is a playa, "a dried up lake bed encircled by a mountain range, sitting undisturbed for the last 30,000 years, a flat beachhead of dried mud for hundreds and hundreds of miles." It would be a great trial and error for the next few years before they would acclimate and learn the rules of the desert. »

From 1991 to 1999, the number of participants nearly doubled in size each year and has steadily increased over the last 10 years to nearly 50,000 participants. Burning Man has grown so drastically within these last 20 years that major astonishing changes and bizarre additions have occurred, including, but not limited to, a 34,000+ square foot center camp equipped with a café so you can still get your coffee, 700+ theme camps, a Burning Man radio station, TV Free Burning Man (Black Rock City's first TV station), PlayaNET (a public WiFi system covering all of Black Rock City), a daily newspaper called the Black Rock Gazette, its own "police force" called the Black Rock Rangers, a DMV (Department of Mutant Vehicles), an airport, a medical facility, streets and esplanades, and a post office. Yes, a real post office! Burning Man has essentially become the annual booming Nevadan city of the 21st century, the Black Rock City... where could it go from here?

Burning Man is organized by "Black Rock City, LLC" and continually strives each year, as the event grows in size, to maintain its mission and follow the ten principles it was founded upon. With a no cash policy, every participant is encouraged to rely on 'gifting', where valuable goods and services are given without any sort of expected reward in return. This leads the way to the community's fundamental principles of radical self-expression, radical inclusion and radical self-reliance. It allows the opportunity to experience what it might feel like to step out of our everyday societal roles and into a world of unbridled, creative expression... and it is the dress, or undress code, that really makes this a reality.

The information about Burning Man is excerpted from their web site www.burningman.com.

Didj Dude, 2003
Dan Adams
Digital Photograph

10 Principles of Burning Man:

1) Radical Inclusion
2) Gifting
3) Decommodification
4) Radical Self-Reliance
5) Radical Self-Expression
6) Communal Effort
7) Civic Responsibility
8) Leave No Trace
9) Participation
10) Immediacy

no title, 2007
Dan Adams
Digital Photograph

no title, 2007
Dan Adams
Digital Photograph

Website Resources

Black Rock Arts Foundation:	http://www.blackrockarts.org
Burncast Blogspot:	http://burncast.blogspot.com/
Burning Man:	http://www.burningman.com/
Burning Man Image Gallery:	http://images.burningman.com/
Dan Adams:	http://web.mac.com/danjadams
Geoffrey Nelson:	http://web.mac.com/geoffreynelsonphoto
Nevada Arts Council:	http://nevadaculture.org/nac/
TV Free Burning Man:	http://current.com/groups/tv-free-burning-man-2008/

Contributors

Gallery Notes written by Geoffrey Nelson with contributions by Fran Morrow, Artist Services Coordinator and Dominique Palladino, Nevada Touring Initiative Associate at the Nevada Arts Council.

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Reno photographer Dan Adams for giving us permission to use some of his Burning Man photographs.
Lori Kunder of Kunder Design Studio for the design of the exhibit gallery notes and signage.

no title, 2005
Dan Adams
Digital Photograph