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San Francisco Chronicle

OAKLAND

Sneak preview of artwork at Burning Man festival

Creations include dangling boulders, virtual helicopter

[Meredith May, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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It had all the trappings of a physics convention: a mechanical engineer at the podium, a 3-D computer model and a riveting discussion of centrifugal force.

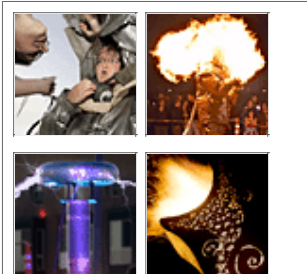
But the recent gathering inside The Crucible arts studio in Oakland was anything but button-down.

Among a panel of artists assembled to discuss the artworks they will introduce at the annual Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert next month was engineer Corbett Griffith, sporting a Mohawk and Versace leopard print pants. He used slides to explain the physics behind the Colossus, a 7-story maypole of dangling 8-ton boulders that will spin with manpower.

"Will fire performers be allowed on the boulders?" an audience member wanted to know.

It was a completely serious question. Zachary Coffin, the Atlanta artist behind the Colossus, didn't rule it out, but told the speaker he'd have to think about it.

With precious few weeks before the event, artists are test-firing and welding the final touches on their large-scale interactive artworks that over the last 20 years have become the hallmark of Burning Man.


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Among the previewed works was a 30-foot mother and child with flames passing between their outstretched hands, built by Karen Cusolito and Dan DasMann of San Francisco.

Pepe Ozan of San Francisco displayed a huge purple head called Dreamer that will appear to be half submerged in the playa floor and will have a fireplace inside and classes on dream interpretation.

One Oakland artist flew the audience in a virtual helicopter over Burning Man's temporary Black Rock City. Andrew Johnstone's new computer program, virtualplaya.org, allows computer users to meet at Burning Man any time of the year -- in cyberspace.

Charlie Smith and Jaime Ladet of Atlanta spent the better part of this year helping artists in six major cities nationwide build crescent-shaped cauldrons. They plan to place all six pieces around an orb in the desert, light it on fire and call it Synapses.

Then there's LawnMowerMan, a mechanical robot that pushes a rotary lawn mower and can be controlled by a global-positioning device. His human inventors are Kevin Walsh and Jeri Countryman of San Francisco.

Most of the artworks shown at The Crucible were partially funded by Burning Man ticket sales revenue. This year, amid artist complaints of paltry support, Burning Man increased art grants to \$400,000 and funded more than 30 projects. A breakaway group of artists assembled under the name BORG2 raised \$20,000 and funded seven additional art projects. They are challenging the main Burning Man organization to a friendly art duel in the desert.

Colossus creator Coffin expects to spend \$85,000 to build his piece. A majority of the funding came from Burning Man, and he's seeking investors to cover the rest. The full-time installation artist will spend \$18,000 of the project's budget hiring two semitrailers to haul his 60,000-pound artwork to the Nevada desert.

"We won't actually build it until we get it out to the desert," Griffith said.

Burners will be able to spin the dangling boulders by grabbing onto shipping ropes. Coffin vaulted to Burning Man fame in 2003 when he created the Temple of Gravity, which featured a dome with five swinging concrete slabs more than a foot thick and as big as king-size mattresses.

"Burning Man is great because it lets artists do things that museums and public art councils will not," he said. "I've been searching for a long time for a way to allow people to play with massively heavy objects without hurting themselves -- too badly."

A sneak preview of Burning Man

To see designs and information about art projects in progress, go to www.burningman.com/installations/05_art_grant.html. For more features, including Faces of Burning Man, go to

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