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Fire as Art

Don't expect to see "Painter of Light" Thomas Kinkade's artwork at a fire arts festival, nor the adoring crowds that flock to his galleries. The crowds that show up at the nighttime fire arts events are expecting lots of pyrotechnics and a major spectacle.

In Oakland, Calif., The Crucible, a non-profit educational collaboration of arts, industry, and community, founded the Fire Arts Festival in conjunction with the Burning Man Festival organizers. In its 150,000-sq-ft "Fire Arts Arena" several dozen artists produced four-alarm works of art during the five-day event. Propane is one of the most popular fuels for the artists, whose work ranges from dancing while wearing fire costumes to fire sculptures and pyrotechnic sculptures.

Fire performer Kristina Canizares of The Nekyia, a performance group based in the Bay Area, choreographed different dance troupes for a number of years before incorporating wearable fire sculpture. She previewed her work at The Crucible's Fire Opera early in 2004.

For the 2004 Fire Arts Festival, Ms. Canizares and another artist, Buzz Voelker at The Crucible, designed a gas system utilizing two propane camping cylinders connected to a lightweight manifolded aluminum tube "peacock fire fan." Five performers including Ms. Canizares, donned the fan, which was attached to a leather skirt and a leather vest. The gas is lit



as part of the performance. The vest has an insulated pack on the back to protect the dancers from the cylinders as they cool down. Each system has an on/off switch and an emergency switch.

Originally, Ms. Canizares used kerosene and white gas for her performances, but switched to propane "because it works much better and lasts longer."

Another Bay Area artist group, The Flaming Lotus Girls, builds fire sculptures that generally use propane and sometimes other fuels and chemicals. Tamara Li, one of the original girls in the group, told **BPN** that many of the members were friends with a common interest in art. Together they began to explore new forms of art, including fire art, which required a lot of knowledge on welding, fire science, plumbing, and much more. As they learned the different aspects of creating fire art, they began to display their art at the Burning Man Festival and at The Crucible.

For the 2004 Fire Arts Festival, The Flaming Lotus Girls previewed part of their Seven Sisters sculpture, designed for last year's Burning Man event, which entailed a metal structure painted pink with six flame-throwing devices that produced different fires. Ms. Li estimated that they used about 400 gallons of propane at the Burning Man in 2004 and approximately 70 gallons at the Oakland event.

Not all of the artists are women. Fire art is dominated by men, including men from the art collective called The Fire Garden group. Another artist, Nate Smith, designed the twisting cyclone of flames called the Singularity Machine, while Wally Glen's sculpture lets one run a rake through sand, releasing fire in what he calls a Fire Zen Garden.

For the 2004 event, Alliance Gas Products/Mavry Welding Supply (Oakland) provided propane for the artists at a discount. Larry White, sales manager, said the firm had been selling propane to artists in the area for some time and knew about The Crucible. White contacted Micheal Sturtz, the founder of The Crucible, and worked out a deal to provide the fuel. Most of the artists have their own tanks (ranging in size from 5 lb to much larger) and equipment and are very knowledgeable about what they are doing, he said. In addition, The Crucible partnered with the Oakland Fire Department for the 2004 event to promote fire safety.

White estimated that he sold about 3000 gallons for the event in 2004. He's received a lot of good feedback and developed additional relationships with more of the fire artists, the majority of whom filled up their tanks at his shop before heading to the Burning Man event in Nevada last August.

According to White, The Crucible is very organized and focused on safety issues. The group had a very detailed safety plan for the festival and reviews the many installations and performances ahead of time. Sturtz told



BPN that he works with the fire department to ensure the safety of the events and the use of flammables at The Crucible. Each artist's application is very detailed and covers equipment, fuel, and safety procedures. Sturtz is one of the main inspectors who reviews the art installations as well as going over fire safety with the artists before the event. He works with Bay City Fire Protector (Oakland), which provides



fire protection equipment and a whole team of safety experts to put on the show.

Fire arts have grown to such an extent that there is even an association, the [North American Fire Arts Association](#), which has been collecting codes and standards information for artists and providing safety and training information.

The 2005 Fire Arts Festival will be held July 13-17 in Oakland. Information is available on [The Crucible's Web site](#).

—Ann Rey

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