

## Sit back and enjoy a good explosion

Tim Goodman

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Mother of All reality series, 8 and 9 p.m. Wednesday, National Geographic Channel.

It's an enduring truism that Americans love to blow stuff up -- you can extrapolate from that all you want -- and we like to light things on fire and bang on steel and make machines out of nothing, all for pleasure.

If we didn't like to do those things -- or watch others do them -- roughly 50 percent of cable channels would have their schedules implode. That's because the trend of the last few seasons is to make a series out of people making something -- chopper, myth-busting device, pimped-out ride, junkyard war, battle-bot, etc. -- on a relatively tight budget, a small window for completion and a bevy of cameras, all rolling.

The National Geographic Channel is the latest to check in, this time with "Mother of All," a series produced out of Emeryville's Michael Hoff Productions and using the unique talents of the crew at Oakland's nonprofit The Crucible, where fine arts and industrial arts are honed in one hell of a hot fire. Whatever can be done with steel, glass, metal, neon, various recycled materials and molten compounds is put to use making the "Mother Of All" things.

Tonight at 8, you can see The Crucible crew make the "Mother of All" frat house refrigerators for the Pi Lambda Phi guys at UC Berkeley -- biometric security system and bicycle-powered drink mixer included. One hour later, the river guides at Whitewater Voyages in Northern California get a raft as tricked out as it is dangerous for rival rafters.

Now, does television need another series where people race deadlines and beat back budgets just to craft something ridiculous for your viewing pleasure? Probably not. But Americans can't seem to get enough of them. And obviously the National Geographic Channel sees an opportunity to educate its audience in a variety of technical areas -- like how to make a high-pressure water cannon to douse other rafters or how to shoot a canned beverage out of a refrigerator and up two or more floors in a perfect, almost majestic, arc.

Which, by the way, is fantastically cool.

And that's the point, is it not? Shows like "Mother of All" may be ubiquitous on the cable landscape, but they are mostly a visual rush to watch and not normally sleazy or irritating in the same way that "Fear Factor" is. So what if the Discovery Channel has created a cottage industry out of sawing up old cars and welding together awesome choppers? People love this stuff and now National Geographic wants its slice.

There are two things working in favor of "Mother of All." It's got the local pride angle going, for starters. The East Bay is amply represented by Michael Hoff and partners churning out still more nonfiction programming for cable. That's a busy little business there in Emeryville. And over in Oakland, The Crucible is getting some much deserved airtime as home to an eclectic band of "extreme industrial artists."

Another essential element to a "transformer" series like "Mother of All" is great personalities and fine editing, which you'll find here in abundance. Michael Sturtz, who leads a crew of likable artists and craftspeople who can make stuff you can't, has a telegenic hipness that helps the series immensely. He doesn't come off as someone posing for the cameras or speaking in that all-too-familiar clever-TV-person patois. He's just a guy who likes fire and steel. He's got a shaved head and a good sense of humor and, like the rest of us, is happy to see stuff blow up if need be.

In short, you'd want to hang out with him. Or at The Crucible.

As host, Becky Worley manages to avoid all of that faux-excited cheerleading that can often derail a series like this, mostly because she honestly seems to be having the best three days of her life every episode. She puts in the sweat equity too, and doesn't have a

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whole lot of priss about her.

One prerequisite of all great nonfiction cable series -- especially those on channels in the nether regions of the spectrum -- is that once you find them, they have to make you want to search them out again. Like you've found a little gem and you're going to watch it over a beer and forearm-size burrito. "Mother of All" fits that bill.

For some reason, much like watching a person get hit in the groin, you can't get enough welding on TV. Literal sparks flying means something cool is under construction. And what's not to like about Sturtz turning a garbage disposal into an ice machine or concocting the idea of having a "beverage delivery system" built into a raft?

And yeah, stuff gets blown up in the experimental stage on "Mother of All, " but it takes a backseat to big machinery, big dreams and people with tattoos melting bronze. All while you sit on the couch with a cold 40, living the dream.

There's a reason shows like this are everywhere on cable. They still retain a hint of the new. Unlike a standard sitcom, the patina of freshness hasn't been rubbed off a "transformer" show by time and laugh tracks.

Even if you've seen every imaginable way to saw a car in half or create a robot or make over a lame stucco house, it almost never gets old. We like making things in this country. American ingenuity is still programming gold.

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