



Courtesy of Chiaroscuro Gallery

Burning Man participants, including San Diego resident Nigel Brooks were photographed by Arizona landscape architect Bill Tonnesen and photographer John Romero. The duo's images will remain on display at Chiaroscuro Gallery in Scottsdale through June 25.

Man in the box

Art exhibit based at Burning Man Project shows personality of event

By **KARYN BONFIGLIO**
Get Out

In his day-to-day life, Nigel Brooks of San Diego is a grant writer. But at the Burning Man Project, he looks like a modern primitive — seated cross-legged like an idol in a 4-foot-square steel box, his chest marked by a hand print and his body painted the same chalk white of the dusty Nevada desert behind him.

His image was captured on film by two Arizona men, landscape architect Bill Tonnesen and photographer John Romero. Brooks' portrait, and others like it, are part of the exhibit "Box People at Burning Man" currently on display at Chiaroscuro Gallery in Scottsdale.

The main group of photographs are on display in the gallery's sunken belly. Against the far wall, three large portraits hang side by side. Smaller

EXHIBIT PREVIEW 'Box People at Burning Man'

Where: Chiaroscuro Gallery, 7160 E. Main St., Scottsdale

When: Through June 25

How much: Free

Info: (480) 429-0711 or www.chiaroscurogallery.com

photos, 12-by-12 inches square, flank the two side walls.

The sepia-toned prints document a handful of the 30,000 people that attended the 2003 Burning Man project — an annual, week-long event without rules or dress code, where the only thing for sale is coffee, ice and the \$250 admission ticket.

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Fast facts about Burning Man

The Burning Man Project is a gathering of more than 30,000 creative people who come together to form a non-commercial, temporary art community in the Nevada desert. The event stresses conservation and works to "leave no trace" on its desert town site.

Where: Black Rock City, Black Rock Desert, Nev.

When: Burning Man 2004 will be held Aug. 30 to Sept. 6

How much: \$225-\$250

Info: (415) TO-FLAME [(415) 863-5263] or www.burningman.com

The Arts

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"What's unusual about Burning Man," Tonnesen says, "is the lack of commercialism. There are no organizers with microphones thanking everybody for coming or advising (people) to go here or do this or do that. The main event of the entire week is the Burning (of a 70-foot tall effigy). It's like there's a critical mass rally that just happens, where thousands of topless women ride bicycles in a giant circle around the playa (dry lake bed the event is held on)."

Romero is a Burning Man veteran — he's been to the event three times. But Tonnesen hadn't heard about it until Romero mentioned he was going again. Tonnesen, who was looking for a new art project, realized he'd found a perfect opportunity. During Tonnesen's previous exhibit at Chiaroscuro, he displayed 4-foot steel frames. After the show, he had the idea to extend the

frames into a cube, put people inside and collaborate with a photographer to record the images as performance/installation pieces.

"I thought it would be a perfect opportunity to find interesting people to put inside the steel box," he says.

"We pushed the box about a mile onto the playa near what's called Main Camp," Tonnesen says, "and watched people walk by." The pair signaled to each other with their hands when they saw potential subjects, then asked the passers-by to climb inside the cube, as-is, and snapped their picture with a medium format Hasselblad camera.

Their images chronicle a dizzying variety of people and costumes: A veiled woman shrouded in black; one man, serene as a Buddha, wearing only jewelry and shoes; a mechanical engineer from West Jordan, Utah, dressed as the Tin Man from the Wizard of Oz. Then there's the image Tonnesen and Romero consider their best: Vanessa Bonet, kneeling in a white dress made out of plastic spoons, a white tank-top and a hat trimmed with

white mice.

But "Box People at Burning Man" isn't only about people in crazy costumes. The exhibit works because of its honesty. The photographs are simple and stark, showing a different side of these everyday men and women, who escaped to a temporary desert community unfettered by commercialism.

"We were looking for people who were living the life as opposed to store-bought dress up," Tonnesen says. "Essentially we were looking for the genuine article and hope that our photographs reflect that creative diversity."

Tonnesen and Romero plan to attend Burning Man 2004 at the end of August to document a new set of faces.

"I already have my tickets. I'm hoping to continue this. We're trying to find a sponsor to help get us there again and a publisher to do a book," Tonnesen says.

But will they bring the box? Or try something new?

"Oh, no, no, no," Tonnesen says. "Definitely the box. The box is a permanent theme."

Burning Man milestones

1986: Baker Beach, San Francisco — In honor of the Summer Solstice, Larry Harvey and Jerry James construct an 8-foot tall wooden figure and burn it.

1987: Figure grows to 20 feet.

1989: Police try to stop the Solstice ceremony while local TV tape their efforts.

1990: Police ban event. A compromise is reached: The figure is erected, but not burned. Participants relocate figure to Black Rock Desert on Labor Day for the burn.

1995: Burning Man becomes most populous settlement (although a temporary one) in Nevada's Pershing County.

2001: Figure grows to 70 feet. Gate staff has problem with counterfeit tickets, but catches 99 percent of them.

2003: Attendance grows to largest ever: 30,586 participants with 504 theme camps.

Rare advice: Think inside the box

By Ernest McIntyre
Special for the Republic

"Think inside the box."

I shook my head and asked local artist Bill Tonnesen to repeat what he had just said. Surely he meant to say, "Think outside the box." That was the conventional wisdom you'd expect from a contemporary artist. But then, few people would use the word "conventional" when referring to Tonnesen.

Tonnesen rocked the local arts world two years ago by writing a book that declared he was going to attempt to become a rich and famous artist in one year. It was brash naiveté, but clearly an example of thinking outside the box. Now he was telling me to think inside the box?

Tonnesen reached for a stack of photographs. It only took one look to see that he was answering my question with his artwork. Laid out on the matte black desk in his office was a series of photographs of unusual attired and unattired people sitting inside an open-ended metal box.

"I'd had this idea of photographing people sitting in a cube for some time, but it was just an idea."

He said the idea had smoldered in his mind until downtown Phoenix photographer John Romero mentioned his plans to go to Nevada's Burning Man festival.

Burning Man declares itself to be an attempt to create a temporary community in the middle of nowhere with virtually no rules of dress, undress, actions or inactions. What you can't do is sell anything at the festival, drive a motor vehicle inside the grounds or take photographs.

Tonnesen and Romero's

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plans could have been derailed, but they applied for, and were granted, permission to photograph willing participants inside a 4-foot-square metal cube on a rolling stand.

"John and I invited fellow 'Burners' to climb inside the cube and have their photo taken," Tonnesen explained. The two artists shot for six hours a day for four days. He handed

me a photo of a young lady in white. She appeared rather normal until I noticed that she was wearing a dress of what appeared to be plastic party utensils that serve both as a spoon and a fork.

"Spork, that's the name she went by at the festival, is from Los Angeles." Tonnesen tapped a note pasted to the photograph that indicated her real name is Vanessa Bonetti. "She's a member of Gigsville, an urban 'doasocracy' tribe preach-

ing that if you have an idea, just do it."

Tonnesen lives by the same philosophy. He had an idea to have Spork at the opening reception, wearing her spoon-fork dress and sitting in the same box that was at the Burning Man festival. Most artists would have dismissed the idea due to logistics and expense, but not Bill Tonnesen. If you go to the Thursday night opening reception, be prepared to think inside the box.



Burning Man participant Vanessa Bonetti, a.k.a. Spork, poses in Bill Tonnesen's metal box wearing a dress made of plastic party utensils.

If you go

WHAT: "Box at Burning Man" exhibition by artists Tonnesen & Romero.

WHERE: Chiaroscuro Gallery, 7160 E. Main St., Scottsdale.

WHEN: Opening reception: 7-10 p.m. Thursday. Gallery hours: 10-5 p.m. Monday-Saturday, noon to 4:30 p.m. Sunday.

ADMISSION: Free.

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THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

BY ANNIKA EDISON

By now, there aren't too many people that have not at least heard of the annual Burning Man event—the ephemeral community that rises in the Nevada desert and then one week later disappears leaving close to no trace behind. The days in between thrive on total expression and community—a time to utilize individual survival skills while tapping into innermost creative forces. The phenomenon has grown exponentially since its inception in the '70s and now sees over 30,000 attendees.

"Box People at Burning Man," currently showing at Scottsdale's Chiaroscuro gallery, is a photographic exhibit spotlighting a slice of the people that comprise the annual celebration. The exhibit is an extension of John Romero, local photographer and three-year burner, as well as Bill Tonnesen, landscape architect and artist whose name lends to evoke a multitude of reactions.

With a long-running mutual respect for each other's work, a chance encounter during a First Friday art walk led the two into discourse about a

possible artistic collaboration. Tonnesen's idea of building a transportable box to cast characters as photographic subjects melded with Romero's love of the fest and desire to document the culture in photographic form. With sponsorship at their foundation, the two built a four-foot steel cube, open on one end, and pushed it just off of the playa. From 10:00 to 6:00 each day, the two would quietly seek out potential subjects and encourage them to hop in the box for a snap. Artistically, Tonnesen saw the mobility and structure of the box mixed with the theatrical surroundings as an opportunity to bring discipline to reality of portraits.

Their efforts have resulted in a stunning exhibit that demonstrates natural expression that rarely experienced first hand, especially in old town Scottsdale where the big 'C' is synonymous with Orbs (as in Gilbert). Gallery location aside, Romero's photos are rich with character. The models were shot on film with a medium-format Hasselblad camera and output on a six-color display



John Romero & Bill Tonnesen



ink jet printer, laminated and dry mounted to gator board. Images are displayed in a bold 56"x56" format as well as smaller versions, 24"x24" and 12"x12". The sepia tones give warmth to the pictures while highlighting the personality in each one. The box in each shot nearly fills the frame except for a slice of natural desert background so subtle that it takes a close eye to give focus to the soft imagery.

For Romero, equally as satisfying as the photographic output, was being able to take Tonnesen along for the adventure and watch him absorb a completely foreign environment. Tonnesen, complacent in his own travels and adventures, had no expectations of being overwhelmed by the Burning Man experience, yet came away with a strong interest that he can't soon stop talking about. "It was a unique experience on many levels," he says. "On the planning level, it has its own dynamic, and it remains fascinating as a destination for projects. The people are creative, thoughtful, artistic and intelligent. I attended the event, sorted out impres-

sions and perceptions—both good and bad—and plan on going back, whether it involves doing an art project or not."

The same holds true for Romero. He's a burner at heart and brims with excitement as the conversation turns toward the upcoming happening. When asked if he is taken aback by the who consider the exhibit an attempt to exploit the culture, Romero does not bend. "There will always be people who feel that way. Burning Man is a great adventure and too fantastic of an event to not be shared." In addition to his other fine art and commercial projects, John intends to continue producing work from Burning Man, and says that a future collection of the images in book format may be a reality. ☘

"Box People at Burning Man" can be seen through June 23rd at the Chiaroscuro gallery, 7160 Main St., Scottsdale, AZ 85251, 480.429.0711, www.chiaroscurogallery.com



All images by JOHN ROMERO and BILL TONNESEN

1. "Eloesh" from Mill Valley, CA; being 2. "Vanity" from Reno, Nevada; unemployed 3. "Nigel Brooks" from San Diego, CA; grant writer 4. "Dalayah Oshah" from Australia; jobless jedi gypsy 5. "Aca MacKay-Smith" from Whittier, B.C.; photographer, dancer 6. "Vanessa Boner" from Hollywood, CA; sells antique jewelry

Jose Shrive of Potter Valley, Calif., entered the box at last year's Burning Man festival, and this is what the camera saw. His image is one of 34 showing at Chiaroscuro Gallery in Scottsdale.



Bill Tonnesen and John Romero

'Box People' a Burning Man experience

By Richard Nilson
richard.nilson@arizona.azcentral.com

Spindly Bill Tonnesen is as tall as a basketball player and as intense as a third-grade boy who has discovered dinosaurs.

What Tonnesen has discovered is art.

By profession, he is a landscape architect, but a few years ago, Tonnesen made a decision to become a gallery artist. He set himself a goal of getting a show within a year, and he accomplished it.

"I'm serious about it," he says. "Some people may say I'm fanatical about it."

Now, the Phoenix man has another show of recent work made at the Burning Man celebration held in Nevada last summer.

Tonnesen and Valley photographer John Romero went to Burning Man with a 4-foot steel cube on a wheeled pedestal and set it out on the hot Nevada desert and asked festival participants to sit inside and be photographed.

Burning Man is a yearly event held in the Black Rock Desert 120 miles northeast of Reno for the week before Labor Day. About 30,000 people showed up in 2003.

"The sheer volume of people and the size of the Burning Man is something I had not seen before.

"There is nothing for sale and nothing to buy there," Tonnesen says. "Everything you are used to seeing, like T-shirts, knickknacks, food, it's not there."

What is there are thousands of people, in costumes or naked, making art and making noise. A lot of music.

"One thing that catches your attention is the Critical Mass Rally, which

is really a topless bicycle procession," he says. "Thousands of women ride bicycles around the perimeter of the playa topless. It's just crazy. It's not sexual; there's grannies and cross-dressing guys, a wide mix."

Tonnesen wasn't exactly in his element.

"At first I was unsure," he says. "I felt odd about asking people to climb into this box. ... Initially, it did not work well, because we allowed people to take their own poses. We had kids standing on their heads, women asking if we wanted something nasty. I was getting irritated."

Tonnesen did not want to have just a bunch of goofy pictures but to create a body of work.

"I think these images should all be strict and regimented. I was thinking more of Richard Avedon, when he put a white sheet behind someone. That continuity puts it into the realm of art for me. I choreographed every shot. 'Square up your shoulders, get focused and serious.' This is a relationship of one image to another. It's not about camping it up."

There are 34 images at Chiaroscuro Gallery in Scottsdale, from the 70 they made. Several are large, at 56 inches square, allowing the images to be life-size. Others are 2 feet square and 12 inches square.

The festival made an impression on Tonnesen.

"I'm going back," he says. "I intend to make it an annual pilgrimage."

DETAILS: "Box People at Burning Man," through June 25 at Chiaroscuro, 7160 Main St., Scottsdale. (480) 429-0711, www.chiaroscurogallery.com.

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