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Beyond words: Burning Man artist hopes to inspire love, dreams and magic

Sausalito exhibit highlights Laura Kimpton's work and two others in 'Jewels of the Playa'

By **VICKI LARSON** | vlarson@marinij.com | Marin Independent Journal

PUBLISHED: January 11, 2023 at 12:00 p.m. | UPDATED: January 16, 2023 at 10:02 a.m.

In perhaps an odd turn of fate, Laura Kimpton is best known for something that has frustrated the Fairfax artist her entire life — words.

Not just any words. Gigantic words, sometimes as large as 12 feet tall and 10 feet wide with each letter weighing some 1,000 pounds or more . Words that proclaim “Love,” “Dream,” “Believe,” “Magic” and “Ego,” and that have be prominently displayed in Los Angeles, Miami, Texas, China and, perhaps most famously, at Burning Man, in



“We know words are so important to people,” she says. “I was told I was ‘retarded’ because I didn’t do words well.”

Some of Kimpton’s large words as well as her other art will be on display in “Jewels of the Playa, the Photography, Art and Fashion of Burning Man,” along with photos by Burning Man documentarian and Sausalito resident Eleanor Preger and festival couture from Sausalito designer Rebecca Bruce, at the Sausalito Center for the Arts this month. It’s the first major exhibit at the newly remodeled, year-old art center that once housed the Bank of America.

“Our goal is to increase the cultural experience in Marin and we thought this would be a fantastic exhibit. There are a lot of people in Marin and the Bay Area who have heard about Burning Man for decades and for whatever reason have never been, so we thought they’d be a lot of interest in seeing what happens over there,” says Louis Briones, the center’s co-executive director. “I’ve never been so I’m one of the guys who’s interested in what’s going on there.”

The exhibit includes about 150 artworks from the three artists.

Kimpton, the daughter of the late hotelier Bill Kimpton who spent part of her childhood living in Sausalito and teacher for 15 years at various Marin schools, has been going to Burning Man, first as a participant and later as an artist, since 2003. She was teaching art at Redwood High School at the time and one of her former students suggested that they go together.

It wasn’t until 2008 that Kimpton presented her own artwork on the playa, “Celtic Forest,” featuring, among other things, seven sculptures and three fiery trees, earning her the first of numerous Black Rock City honorarium, grants that partially fund installation artworks that meet the organization’s strict artistic requirements. Her Monumental Words series was inspired by the iconic Hollywood sign, and she’s been building them at Burning Man and elsewhere ever since.

The words she chooses, she says, “have to resonate with me and I believe it needs to go out into the world.”

Although her work incorporates mixed media, ever since her father’s death from leukemia in 2001, Kimpton has included bird imagery in it. While her father, who was also dyslexic, was in the hospital, she noticed a lot of birds circling around and perching on the building. She saw that as a sign. Birds, she believes, represent a way to live free from negative messaging that we internalize. Her father, she says, besides

“I didn’t figure out that dyslexia was my superpower until I started making art at Burning Man,” says Kimpton, who has bachelor degrees in art education and fine art, as well as a master’s degree in psychology. “One thing Burning Man did for me, at Burning Man they put the artist and the female on a pedestal.”

“Laura Kimpton is your quintessential super creative artist,” says Briones. “She’s created some of the most iconic images of Burning Man with these big sculptures. A lot of the stuff people associate with Burning Man, Laura created them. She’s just oozing with creativity and constantly expressing them in different ways.”

Kimpton’s work is “a little gritty and messy, but it’s very conceptual and has a lot of depth,” says Tara Schon, co-owner of the Zener Schon Gallery in San Anselmo, which has featured her artwork.

Her dyslexia and PTSD from an abusive childhood (not from her father, she’s quick to mention) drive Kimpton’s work. “But not in a heavy way. It’s more about how we can cope, about that internal voice,” she says.

That’s the message Kimpton is hopeful visitors to the exhibit will take away from her work.

“I call it a ‘wow’ moment. Wow moments in art turn off your internal voices,” she says. “It starts you over again.”

IF YOU GO

What: “Jewels of the Playa, the Photography, Art and Fashion of Burning Man”

When: Jan. 14 to 29; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays

Where: Sausalito Center for the Arts, 750 Bridgeway, Sausalito

Admission: Free

Information: sausalitocenterforthearts.org

More: An artist discussion panel is from 6 to 8 p.m. Jan. 18.

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Vicki Larson is an author and has been an award-winning lifestyles editor, writer and columnist at the IJ since 2004. She has worked as an editor in Santa Rosa, Petaluma, Walnut Creek, San Francisco, Napa and Miami.

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