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## Three Women Bonded Over Art: A Creative Friendship United Through Burning Man

by Kirsten Jones Neff April 21, 2023



“Forest of Dreams” by Laura Kimpton.

What if the brilliance of one woman’s creative success does not leave her friends in the shadows, but rather shines on their creative brilliance and successes? This phenomenon, which has been called everything from The Shine Theory to Freudenfreude, is a joyous reality for three local female artists who instinctively understand that neither creativity nor success are a zero-sum game. Over the past decade and a half, fashion designer Rebecca Bruce, photographer Eleanor Preger and mixed-media and sculpture artist Laura Kimpton have bonded through their artistic pursuits, as well as through their love of and commitment to Burning Man.

In January a show at the Sausalito Center for the Arts entitled *Jewels of the Playa: The Photography, Art and Fashion of Burning Man* highlighted the works and collective radiance of these women. The opening night featured human beings in art form, wandering through Kimpton’s towering metal trees, adorned in Bruce’s dramatic garb, often the same outfits displayed in Preger’s photographs, which, in many cases, featured Kimpton’s installations. This complex cross-pollination makes perfect sense in the context of the “hive” metaphor that Bruce uses to describe the friendship tribe the three Marin-County based women have created. “It is the idea of a hive, and we all have different pieces that we offer each other.” says Bruce. “When you put yourself out there you begin having these collective experiences where everybody needs each other and the pieces they offer.”

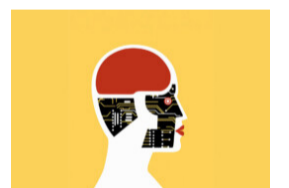
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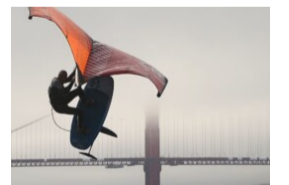
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Bruce and Kimpton met over 15 years ago when they were both working on Hilary Clinton’s 2008 political campaign. “I had always wanted to learn to weld,” says Bruce, who designs striking textured pieces in her bayfront Sausalito studio. “Laura invited me out to her ranch in Nicasio to learn to weld and to work on her crew.” Kimpton’s massive installations require large crews, sometimes 50 or 60 people, and soon after the visit to Nicasio, Bruce joined Kimpton’s crew at Burning Man, installing Kimpton’s Celtic Forest, which, according to Kimpton, was her most ambitious installation. The forest involved massive steel trees (up to 22 feet) topped by flames, and surrounded by multiple sculptures, including a fiery moat containing a sculpture of the Celtic goddess of fire.



Bruce, Preger and Kimpton: Photo by, Josh Kepple

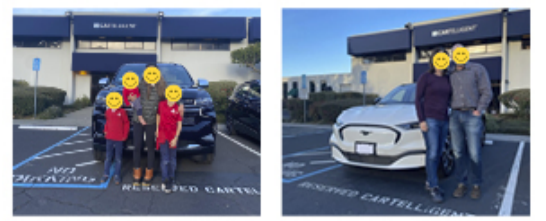
As their friendship deepened, Kimpton fell in love with Bruce’s designs and asked her to create bespoke pieces for her for Burning Man and other openings and events. “Becky makes me funky,” says Kimpton. “She has dressed me for so many events, including the Artumnal (a fundraiser for Burning Man artists each fall), Art Basel Miami, a keynote at the University of Chicago... so many important events.” Bruce, for her part, says she has developed a nuanced sense of what Kimpton will like. “My whole ethos is that every human is an art form. How do you dress your narrative?” she says. “Laura likes layering. She likes textures. And, she can go grunge.”

Bruce also has also developed a strong sense of what Preger loves to wear, and has made approximately 50 pieces for Preger over the years. Bruce and Kimpton both met Preger at Burning Man over ten years ago as Preger documented the experiential and material artistry of the Playa and, on the power of her images, was invited to become a member of the official Burning Man Documentation Team. According to Bruce, Preger does not do grunge. What she does do is repurposed designer pieces and eye-catching fabrics, such as the flowing and fiery orange, yellow and black Rebecca Bruce piece Preger wore to the *Jewels of the Playa* opening night. “Rebecca has patterns for me,” says Preger. “We collaborate... and sometimes I’ll just say ‘make something!’ She took my husband’s wedding jacket from 28 years ago and added pewter buttons and a chain down the side and a serpent on the back. It is fantastic.”

Preger developed the idea for the *Jewels of the Playa* show with Louis Briones, the Director of the Sausalito Art Festival Foundation. In 2010 she discovered the magic of Burning Man through happenstance. Living part-time in Incline at Lake Tahoe, she is a patron at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, which afforded her the opportunity to go to Burning Man. “When I was invited I said, ‘Why would I want to go to Burning Man?’” she recalls. But upon arriving at the Playa, Preger knew immediately that she would return the following year. “I took a friend that first year and we went from 7 a.m. to midnight. There were over 200 art pieces and we both said immediately, ‘We are coming back next year.’ Then the next year I was injured, but I told the doctor he had to take the cast off before I went. I got a golf cart and a handicapped pass and I covered the whole place. And that was the beginning of my serious photography.”

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“Forest of Dreams” by Laura Kimpton

As Preger speaks about her photography, she sounds most proud of the moments when she has captured the spirit of a friend. One example is a photo she took at Burning Man last year, an image of Kimpton at dusk, standing amidst the trees in her Forest of Dreams installation. “I hooked up with Laura one sunset and took a picture that I think really captured her — in between her art, after a dust storm. She just looks fierce,” says Preger.

Kimpton’s large scale sculptures and assemblages have been displayed in major cities and art shows across the nation. Like her father, the late hotelier Bill Kimpton, Laura Kimpton is dyslexic, and struggled with academics when she was young. “I am not a facts person. I will not give you facts. In fact, I’ve found that facts are really only useful at cocktail parties and for Trivial Pursuit,” she says, laughing. Kimpton was naturally drawn to sports and art, and thrived working in three-dimensional space. Making art at Burning Man, including massive word structures, she says, has helped her to appreciate her dyslexia as a gift, a superpower even. “It is a whole different world at Burning Man. There is a feminine energy, and art is put on a pedestal,” she says. “I have two ideas I want to express. One is that humans are not number one on the planet. We are all equal. And number two is that right brain intelligence is not inferior to left brain intelligence.” In her previous career as an art teacher in Marin schools, Kimpton strived to help young people understand and honor their own creative superpowers. She believes her own differences have made her especially resilient — that fierceness captured in Preger’s photo on the Playa.



Kimpton and Preger

Rebecca Bruce echoes Kimpton’s praise of the expansive power of Burning Man, especially when it comes to art as a device for communication and expression. As she designs clothing for her clients, she wants to understand the meaning of their Playa name, a Burning Man name that allows “Burners” to express new identities or ways of being, so she can better understand their narratives. Her own Playa name is Mandala, which, for her, means she is “in the center of my selves, with many paths leading out from the center. Each path is a good path. I am not ruling anything out.” Preger, who chose the surprising new path that led to the Playa back in 2010, believes that Burning Man chose her, drew her in, and gave her a “posse” that includes Bruce and Kimpton. “The three of us have so much fun together. We know all kinds of people, we support each other’s work and always introduce each other to all kinds of people,” says Preger. The three artists refer to the core principles of Burning Man, and, indeed, the story of their personal and collaborative journeys, their distinct but intertwined paths, are a manifestation of the sixth principle, which is Communal Effort. “We are all just a few degrees of separation” says Bruce. “We are not in competition, and we celebrate each other’s individual artistry, always finding ways to support each other. We also support younger emerging artists... and bring them into the vortex.”



*Kirsten Jones Neff is a journalist who writes about all things North Bay, with special attention to the environment and the region’s farmers, winemakers and food artisans. She also works and teaches in school gardens. Kirsten’s poetry collection, When The House Is Quiet, was nominated for the Northern California Book Award, and three of her poems received a Pushcart nomination. She lives in Novato with her husband and three children and tries to spend as much time as possible on our local mountains, beaches and waterways. For more on her work visit [KirstenJonesNeff.Com](http://KirstenJonesNeff.Com).*

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