

**Pretty and Peculiar**  
 opens  
 1/11/2020  
 6-9pm

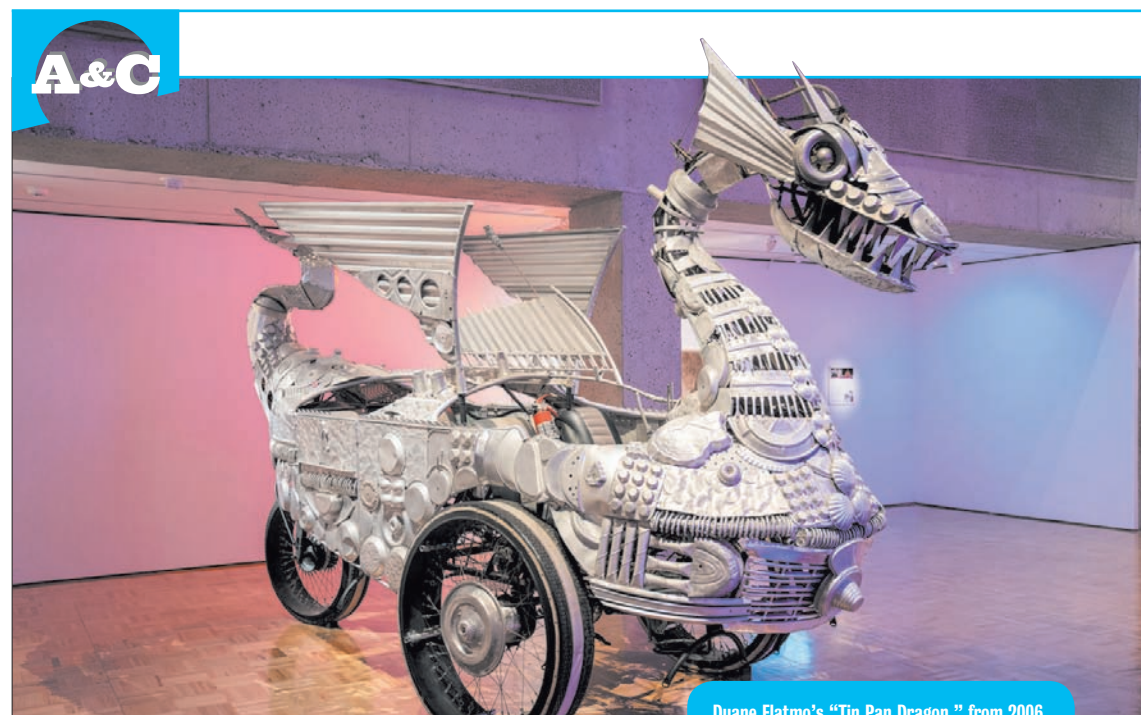
**FE**  
 GALLERY

Lucky  
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<b>1/9 • 7:30 PM JAWS</b>
<b>1/10 • 7:30 PM THE SHINING</b>
<b>1/12 • 2:00 PM TOY STORY DOUBLE FEATURE</b>
<b>1/14 • 7:00 PM RAGING BULL</b>
<b>1/17 • 7:30 PM SINGIN' IN THE RAIN</b>
<b>1/18 • 3:30 PM &amp; 9:30 PM FRIDAY</b>
<b>1/18 • 6:00 PM PRINCESS MONONOKE</b>
<b>1/19 • 7:30 PM PSYCHO</b>
<b>1/28 • 7:30 PM THE DARK CRYSTAL</b>

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Duane Flatmo's "Tin Pan Dragon," from 2006.

PHOTO COURTESY OF OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA

# Burn after viewing

## The Smithsonian's Burning Man exhibition hits Oakland

/ BY KRIS VAGNER

**No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man** opened at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in March 2018 and is now at its only West Coast venue, the Oakland Museum of California, through mid-February.

Nora Atkinson, the Smithsonian curator who organized the show, described Burning Man art in a TED Talk: "When artists stop worrying about the critics and collectors and start making work for themselves, these are the kinds of marvelous toys they create."

Several weeks ago, the exhibition was packed—mostly with well-dressed people in their 60s and 70s, a few Gen Xers and a handful of kids and teens. There was a quiet chorus of "oohs," "aahs" and "wows," and, amazingly, museum guards who did not look bored.

The works in *No Spectators* were indeed marvelous toys, and people were eager to play with them. A group of grandmas sat down at a table to make origami "gifts" to be distributed to other museum goers, lined up at the "Gift O Matic," an oversized gumball machine that dispenses the handmade trinkets.

The show presented a dilemma. What does it mean to contextualize a genre of art that is inherently anti-institutional—and often straight-up anarchic—inside a museum? The playa and the museum exist in two separate art worlds. One is a world of art schools, museums, galleries, auctions and sales. The other is an arena of non-academic DIY types; everyone from entry-level crafters to masters of engineering. The mecca of this second world is Burning Man. These two worlds have some crossover, but less than you might guess.

Then there's the disconnect between Burning Man's widely flaunted principle of "radical inclusion" and the actual level of exclusivity involved in the whole affair. Ben Davis, a critic for Artnet, distilled it neatly: "As the festival has become more of a playground for fashion influencers, celebrities, the jet-setting uber-wealthy and would-be versions of all three, it has become more self-conscious and scene-y, easier to deride as an 'Instagram Party.'"

The \$425 ticket, the travel expenses, the week off from work and the mountains of food and gear to be purchased really do make the event's claim of "radical inclusion" sound tone deaf.

For all its contradictions, though, the event's accomplishments suppress the urge to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Sometimes art really does get to the true creamy middle of what we're all about.

As Atkinson said in her talk, "Burning Man is all about building this society that you want to live in, and that's what this exhibition is about." This particular assortment of exuberant, interactive artworks makes that case loud and clear. And Burner art, because it grew up outside of the official "art market," can be a particularly effective structure to show other people our humanity, our dreams, our accomplishments, our visions for a more socially stable world.

In the museum, boomers in clean Patagonia lay on cushions on the floor to gaze up at "Nova," a trippy, meditative light show on the ceiling. People sat in rows of plush movie theater seats on a steampunk/Art Deco bus-like vehicle called "Capitol Theater," watching newly created Chaplinesque silent comedies projected.

If you go to Burning Man, you'll see artworks that are so ambitious and life-affirming it's hard to believe they exist. But the works in *No Spectators* aren't just "marvelous toys." They're also a tightly selected group of art pieces that really do articulate that sense of intense wonder—and that sense of community—that draws people to Burning Man. □

*No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man* is on view at the Oakland Museum of California through Feb. 16. Visit [museumca.org](http://museumca.org) for more information.