

Lively exhibits bring visitors to High Desert Museum

By T. Lee Brown
Correspondent

High Desert Museum members glimpsed hints of utopia and indigenous futurism on Friday, at the preview for the new exhibition “Imagine a World.” Featuring themed, catered treats and a live DJ, the event also offered access to other temporary shows currently on display.

The brightest, most exciting section of “Imagine a World” features original artworks. Called “Indigenous Futurisms,” it shows three Native artists who “envision alternative worlds and recognize the ways that cosmology, science, and futurism have long been part of Indigenous worldviews and oral traditions,” imagining “Native people well into the future.”

Above visitors’ heads float the space-suited “Astra Sapiens” of Frank Buffalo Hyde (Nez Perce/Onondaga Nation, Beaver Clan). The Santa Fe artist described the intention behind the installation: “We live in a world addicted to living our best lives on social media... My perspective is from a position of power and positivity. A good amount of my work isn’t for the gaze of the art market or collectors—it’s for Indigenous people.”

From closer to home come Brutis Baez (Wasco, Paiute, Warm Springs), presenting a video installation; and Camas Logue (Klamath, Modoc, Northern Paiute), a multidisciplinary artist.

Logue’s shimmering, textural works in oil and graphite on wood form a bold and entrancing diptych. The future implied is a sobering one; the piece is named after last year’s Bootleg Fire in Southern Oregon, the third-largest fire in the history of the state since 1900. The title reads, “(loloks / bootleg fire) our ancestral homelands

burn while the settlers steal the water.”

Critics have taken to task various “back to the land” lifestyle efforts and idealistic communes in the American West, like those featured in this exhibit. Commonly led and inhabited by white people of European colonial ancestry, these movements — following the 19th century’s “manifest destiny” credo — assume that the West’s alluring, wide-open spaces are empty, blank, just waiting for white visionaries, builders, ranchers, and farmers to fill them up.

The West was already rich with history, culture, nature, and humanity for thousands of years before colonization.

“Imagine a world where Indigenous people have the land back,” wrote Logue in an artist’s statement, “how that would truly be back to the land.”

Educational displays with sculptural elements and interactive touches fill up most of the small gallery. “Imagine a World” focuses on the Utopian dreams and historical realities of several intentional communities in the West. The most well-known to Oregonians is likely to be Rajneeshpuram, an experiment in alternative living that went awry (*see related article, page 16*).

Drop City was a classic counterculture artists’ community, formed in Colorado in 1965. The founders saw

their new way of living as an extension of Drop Art, an approach they invented. Their work was influenced by Allan Kaprow’s infamous Happenings and the improvised performances of artists like John Cage at Black Mountain College.

Inspired by the architectural ideas of Buckminster Fuller and Steve Baer, residents famously built domes and zonohedra to live in, using auto parts and other inexpensive or recycled materials. Part of one dome is installed at the High Desert Museum, with its geometric panels labeled “Do Not Touch.” In 1967 the group won Fuller’s Dymaxion Award for their efforts.

A large black plaque at the show read, “For being such an out there, on-the-cutting-edge community, the gender division was remarkably traditional. I’ll just say that I never saw a guy wash a dish.” The quote was attributed to Drop City member Carol DiJulio.

Another display explores Hog Farm, a roving hippie experiment sometimes taking the form of a commune. Spearheaded by activist-clown-wildman Wavy Gravy (a.k.a. Hugh Romney) and his wife Bonnie Beecher (a.k.a. Jahanara Romney), the group combines media pranksterism, clowning, and working toward political change, and supporting events such as the Woodstock festival.



PHOTO BY TL BROWN

Red space-people hover above blue buffalo in Frank Buffalo Hyde’s “Astra Sapiens NDN2K22.” Camas Logue’s work in oil and graphite on wood is on view to the left.

At Woodstock, the Hog Farm crew were hired to build fire pits and trails. Then they set up a free kitchen—an element essential to the counterculture that emerged in 1960s San Francisco, thanks to the Diggers. When informed that they were also to perform security, Hog Farmers promptly named themselves the “Please Force” (as opposed to police force) and asked people to please do the right thing as needed.

Hog Farm once took the form of an actual hog farm in California, teeming with ’60s hippies. Today the group has a headquarters in Berkeley and a ranch in Mendocino County, hosting music festivals and a performing arts camp for children, Camp Winnarainbow.

At the exhibit’s center, an interactive art installation allowed visitors to type in words describing their potential Utopia, resulting in a computer-generated projection. “Imagine a World” runs through September 25.

Other temporary exhibitions on view included “X-Ray Vision: Fish Inside Out” from the Smithsonian, a visually stunning, immersive installation of undulating black-and-white X-rays of fish species arranged in evolutionary sequence (through May 8).

“Carrying Messages: Native Runners, Ancestral Homelands and Awakening” celebrates several Native people who draw on running as a means of empowerment, sovereignty and cultural revitalization (through April 3).

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