



HEAT AND DUST

Owen A. Kelly braves the desert to shoot the life and landscape of Burning Man

BY RUSSELL HART

► The perennial weeklong desert spectacle known as Burning Man — which starts at the end of August in bleak northwest Nevada — is all things to all comers: the ultimate art show, a test of self-reliance, an apocalyptic lovefest. For Owen A. Kelly in particular, Burning Man is the occasion for an annual pilgrimage to photograph the event's curious, evanescent social tapestry. Every year he goes on hiatus from his day job as an assistant (currently with fashion and celebrity photographer David LaChapelle) to set up a daylight studio in the dry lakebed staked out by some 50,000 "Burners."

Last year's project was Kelly's most ambitious: to shoot Burning Man's "Mutant Vehicles" — the cars, vans and buses that are transformed into collective art on wheels, the festival's peaceable answer to *Mad Max*. The raw materials for the photographer's Mutant Vehicle Polaroid Booth were hauled in on two 33-foot flatbed trucks and three four-wheel drives, and included 20,000 pounds of scaffolding and 2,600 feet of heavy guy wire. Its light-diffusing panel measured 40-by-70 feet, and the studio itself was 125 feet wide by 35 feet high. It took the services of 13 volunteer assistants to build, maintain and

operate. As word of the MVPB spread, Mutant Vehicles began lining up and driving in for their portrait, some carrying dozens of costumed riders.

Kelly calls his Burning Man pictures "BRC Playa Portraits" in reference to Black Rock City, the festival's self-declared metropolis, and the lakebed's powdery sand, which can cause whiteouts on windy days. The latter is the scourge of photographers shooting with sensitive electronic and mechanical gear. Kelly's elemental 4x5 view camera was more forgiving, but the sand still coated his Polaroid Type 55 P/N negatives and film holders, causing pinholes and other forms of distress in the already expired film. Kelly tried to fight it, but ultimately accepted its effect as part of the creative process and the look of his images.

At this year's festival, Kelly will forgo the studio in order to photograph Burning Man's desert encampments. "The living scenarios of the Burners are fascinating," he says. "The simplest requirements of life become a strenuous endeavor." In the microcosm of Burning Man, the same can be said about photography. AP