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## Local artists feel the burn Newest art form goes to the blazes

**Newest art form goes to the blazes** By Angela Hill, STAFF WRITER OAKLAND

By Angela Hill, STAFF WRITER

NO, the little lights swaying around on a dark West Oakland street last week were not a small meteor shower touching down. Not a swarm of migratory fireflies. Not somebody setting fire to a building for insurance purposes.

These were "toys" of the five-member Fire Arts Collective, which is basically a group of really crazy people way too familiar with the business end of a match.

They like to set fire to stuff like hoops or fans or batons and then do the fandango with them, leaping flaming jump ropes in a single bound -- and not in the sensible fashion of trying to get away from them, but rather going back for more and more.

"It's a form of release, getting into your own world and playing with a live element," said Collective fire dancer Cheryl Fralick. "It rekindles a childlike enthusiasm for life.

"There are probably triple the number of people spinning fire than there were just a couple of years ago," she said. "People have discovered it's a fun way to play with fire as an adult, and not get arrested."

Yes, fire is hot these days in the Bay Area party scene. Fire: The new black. Some fire dancers, such as the Collective members, perform professionally at parties and events. (They're even working at a wedding in May.) Others are individuals just enjoying it as a hobby.

Either way, it all pretty much started as -- and still is -- the edgy entertainment at underground parties, and is of course a perfect match with the annual Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert. But it's also going pretty mainstream. The collective even performed at a corporate Christmas party for Google this past December. Heaven forfend!

But for those of us who've burned ourselves on a cup of coffee and now shudder at the mere sight of a commuter mug, it might be hard to imagine using flame on a regular basis other than for such handy purposes as birthday cakes, the occasional cigar and pilot lights.

Yet these people love it. **Love** it. If they could, they'd marry it. They're drawn to it, much like Mothra to a flaming Japanese village.

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"There's something about dealing with a moving live element," said Andrea Drugay. "It puts things in perspective."

In this group of 20- and 30-somethings, you'd be hard pressed to find a member who was not a pyro child. Dickinson set his backyard on fire when he was a kid in Tracy. As a pre-teen, Drugay and her friends tried to play "flaming tennis."

"We'd spray a tennis ball and soak it with hair spray," she said. "But it didn't work too well because we'd light it on fire and hit it and everyone would run screaming."

Then there's Laura Pellaton, who got in trouble for lighting things on fire, so her parents put up a sign that read, "Don't light fires in the house."

"I set fire to the sign," she said.

Amazingly enough, all these people grew up and have other jobs in the real world. Dickinson is a student and an administrative assistant for a real estate office in Emeryville. He's going for his real estate license and wants to start an investment company when he gets out of college.

Pellaton and Jeff Swiatek work together at a hair salon. He's the manager and freelance makeup artist. She's a hair stylist, but is also majoring in anthropology at Cal State Hayward. Swiatek moved here from Florida in 2002, where "nobody's doing the fire dancing scene at all," he said.

Fralick, a martial arts expert, owns a landscaping business. She has a 15-year-old son who has spun fire, "but thinks Mom is absolutely nuts," she said.

Drugay works in high-tech and has an eight-year background in yoga, which she feels helps with the fire-dancing moves. "Plus I'm a fire sign. Aries," she said.

The collective formed about 18 months ago, and gets work mostly through word of mouth, Craigslist and its Web site [www.fireartscollective.com](http://www.fireartscollective.com) Dickinson even teaches fire dancing classes.

Needless to say, this is a don't-try-this-at-home kind of thing, because even the pros sometimes get burned. "I'm wearing false eyelashes tonight," Pellaton said. "The real ones got singed."

"And I got a deep second-degree burn last year," she added. "We had a safety person, but I don't think she realized what a high pressure job it is when something actually happens. I basically had something on fire wrapped around my neck, and the girl kind of froze. Then missed. Cheryl ended up pulling it off."

Since then, the group has routine safety drills and procedures, wet towels and fire extinguishers at the ready. They tie back, wet down and/or cover up their hair. Stop, drop and roll is their steadfast motto.

"The problem with new fire dancers is they think they can control the flame," Drugay said. "You can't. It's always gonna win. You have to learn to work with it. If not, it can be really, really destructive."

The group has a virtual arsenal of "toys," or spinning devices. The staple toy is "poi." No, not that yucky stuff at Hawaiian luaus. This poi refers to the Maori word for a ball on a cord that is swung around the body, sometimes aflame.

For this, they use mainly a ball chain with a leather strap handle on one end and a clump of wick on the other, made of tightly wrapped Kevlar and Fiberglas. Then they soak it in fuel.

Fuel varies too. They either use lamp oil, "white gas" or lighter fluid. "White gas is basically like the fuel you'd used in a Coleman stove," Drugay said. "Lamp oil burns the longest, but it's also the smokiest. So if you're performing inside, white gas is best. Cleanest, but it burns very fast."

Who knew there was so much to know about setting things on fire?

Most fire shows are outdoors these days -- especially since the awful incident during a Great White concert last year when a pyrotechnics display went wrong, burning down a

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Rhode Island nightclub and killing 96 people.

So indoors, the collective often uses LED-lighted devices that resemble neon nunchucks. Those are pretty cool too, literally.

The group practices every Thursday, year-round, in a big upper room in an old West Oakland warehouse that has been converted into a live/work art space. They drill with non-flaming sandbags, but sometimes they just can't resist and go outside to "light up."

So at a practice about a week ago, as soon as night fell, they tried to find the darkest spot on the street where there weren't too many streetlights. They brought their "toys" and paint cans of fuel, plus the omnipresent fire extinguisher and wet cloths.

They picked a place by some loading docks, getting more and more excited about which trick to show first. The poi was soaked, and it was time to do the flame-free "spin out."

"We spin out the excess fuel, or little flames will go spewing out into the audience when we light up," Dickinson explained. "That's not good."

Well, no. So they all stood there in the dark, spinning like a bunch of nocturnal baton twirlers. Then they ran through some moves. Then it was time for the real thing.

"Who's got the lighter?"

Dickinson flicked a Bic and touched off the pois. Shoop. Suddenly, the little black clumps of Kevlar turned to great balls of fire, the wind trying to whip them out. There was an unexpected noise. As the flame whizzed through the air, it sounded, oddly enough, like rushing water.

They started twirling again, this time drawing wild circles of flame. Fireflies without a rudder. They did a rocking line-dance formation, a conga line all aglow. The smell of lamp oil soaked the air.

In a few minutes -- quickly because of the windy cool night -- the flames began to wither and die. They usually last about 15 minutes or more. So they pulled out some other toys. Drugay wove her fingers through coils of long metal sticks with flaming wicks on the ends that looked like when you roast marshmallows and they catch on fire at the end of the stick.

Fralick donned her hand-made "fire jacket" -- an old leather coat, now adorned with fire fingers poking through the sleeves. Aflame, it looked like candelabras on her arms. She swirled and kneeled in coy CatWoman style.

On to the big finale -- the jump rope.

"Our jump rope is making us famous right now," Fralick said. "Nobody else is doing it."

They soaked two ropes in fuel in a big bucket, then Fralick, Swiatek, Drugay and Pellaton took the ends, spinning out the excess fuel. They got the ropes in an X formation, crossing them on the ground so they'd intersect in the center. Dickinson lit the rope at the X, then stood back as the flame crawled up the cords.

He started running around the whole group, picking up speed. Then he jumped in. Nobody said anything about "sittin' in a tree" or "k-i-s-s-i-n-g." This was not your school yard jump rope.

"Elemental, isn't it?" Fralick said, grinning. They all were loving it, like the little pyro kids they are.

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