

Art in Nature: The Nature of Art

A Day to Commune and Create in the Redwoods

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COURTESY OF MARCO SANCHEZ

Imagine strolling down a forest path, inhaling the piney air under a canopy of trees, when suddenly you come upon a troop of costumed troubadours playing violins, flutes and drums, while dancing bodies dart between the towering redwoods. Farther down the path, a man wielding kitchen tools attacks a huge block of clay as a chorus of a cappella voices blends into exotic harmonies. Continuing your walk, you encounter 200 artists performing everything from taiko drumming to living dance sculptures, *capoeira* to poetry and even a balloon artist (shaping compostable corn balloons, of course). When inspiration hits, you can add to a communal mural or enter a meditative create-with-nature zone.

This expressive woodsy escapade is not a dream; it's Art in Nature: The Nature of Art Festival, an only-in-Oakland celebration held in ravishing Redwood Regional Park. The third annual event, presented by Samavesha, a nonprofit arts organization, will take place along a 1-mile stretch of the Stream Trail from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sept. 23. And best of all: Not only is the event completely free, it's also non-commercialized, so there are no souvenirs or even snack vendors to distract from the serene setting and exhilarating creative expressions. It's just you and your family (dogs included) exploring art in the glorious redwood forest.

The brainchild of Laura Inserra, composer, teacher and multi-instrumentalist, this seemingly improvised magical event is actually the result of a year's worth of meticulous planning. Inserra, co-director John Coveney and scores of other volunteers started organizing the 2012 festival the day after last year's successful event.

As its artistic director, Inserra, a native of Sicily, describes her vision for the festival, "I look to the arts during the period of Michelangelo, when artists did not say, 'I am a musician; you are a dancer; he is a sculptor.' Now, unfortunately, we put art in all these separate compartments. For me, art is one body expressing itself in all these different forms."

The festival map, available on the website www.artinnaturefestival.org, illustrates a dozen integrated themed sites. The Fern Dell space, for example, is home to a collaborative mural, music, dance and a sacred altar. "Each site has more than one expression," Inserra explains, "because the point is having interactions between visual art, music and poetry."

Co-director Coveney, who is in charge of logistics for handling the expected 2,000-plus attendees, describes the layout, "Like pearls on a necklace, the mile-long path is strung with hidden jewels that reveal themselves as you go around each bend." A sculptor who uses recycled and up-cycled materials, Coveney describes his partnership with Inserra, "I create the container and she fills it with marvelous things." The 'container' includes the bureaucratic details of permits, insurance, food

for 200 artists, arrangements for parking and shuttles.”

An important point for festivalgoers: There is extremely limited parking at the park, and so visitors are encouraged to use the shuttle buses that leave from Merritt College (12500 Campus Drive, Oakland). Shuttle tickets are \$5 for adults and \$2 for children under age 12, and advance purchase is recommended (See “Getting There” on the festival website). Bring a picnic lunch and water, as there is no food for sale inside the festival — which makes its leave- no-trace policy easier to follow. This year, for the first time, there will be two food trucks in the parking lot for visitors who become so immersed in their creative explorations that they forget to eat.

A primary goal of the festival is to awaken and encourage the creative spark in everyone. “It’s not about artists and non-artists,” states Inserra. “Every kid says, ‘Of course, I’m an artist.’ Then later, that changes to, ‘I’m not good at this’ or ‘I did that wrong.’ We want to keep the spark alive or re-ignite it.”

The title, Art in Nature: The Nature of Art, reflects a two-part theme: the first half refers to art inspired by the majestic natural setting. In the Create with Nature Zone, environmental artist Zach Pine encourages participants to use the redwood grove as inspiration to create with each other and with nature. Pine lays out a “buffet” of natural items (leaves, pine cones, branches, redwood needles, bones) from which visitors may choose. “Some people make a little scale model of the redwood grove, or a fairy house with a leaf for a bed, mandalas or symbolic offerings. Certain themes have resonance, like rivers and paths,” Pine says. “These are temporary creations,” he clarifies. “The aim is to enjoy the experience of creating them. Other people will come along later and add-on or recycle elements. So it’s spontaneous, collaborative and evolving.” Pine, who has led many collective art events in public spaces, sees his role as a catalyst, welcoming, providing materials, giving people permission to create, perhaps offering an enticing stick or rock to get them started.

To fulfill the second half of the title, The Nature of Art, Inserra and Coveney want to broaden the perception that appreciating art means looking at finished pieces, so they have arranged for visitors to watch as professional artists develop their works of art, which they hope will inspire people to continue their own creative explorations when they return home. In some sites, artists will speak as they work, explaining their process. For example, Inserra narrates the flowing counterpoint between a violinist, a dancer and a painter, pointing out how each artist in turn takes the lead in an interactive improvisation. “Revealing the artists’ strategies is another way to translate the divine language of art,” says Inserra.

With the support of Redwood Regional Park supervisor Di Rosario, another aim of the festival is to highlight the rich beauty available in Oakland parks. Zach Pine says, “One of most exciting parts of this festival is encountering people who have come to the park for the first time and connecting them with nature. There are those who may live in the flatlands or a suburb and spend their days living a technologically/cubically oriented city life.” Likewise, regular park hikers may also have never imagined themselves creating something. The result: a cross-pollination between art lovers and nature lovers.

One exciting partnership this year involves the East Oakland Boxing Association, whose programs — from organic gardening to boxing — nurture and inspire East Oakland youth from underserved communities. A group of young people from EOBA will serve as guardians and facilitators of a specific art area in the festival to forge a connection to the park. “Most of these kids from East Oakland are limited in their geographical traveling,” says program coordinator Dan Robinson. “This opportunity will give them a sense of ownership and responsibility so that the kids see this park as partly theirs and will visit it again.”

For Inserra, who grew up in a small town in Sicily surrounded by artist friends and family members, art in nature is a natural combination. “Where else do we get inspiration but in the creations of nature?”

While no admission fee is charged, donations are encouraged in boxes and altars scattered around the site. The cost of the festival runs \$12,000 in raw expenses (park rental, event fees, permits, parking, shuttle, insurance, printing, food for the artists and crew). “But the festival would not be possible without the many hundreds of hours donated by Samavesh’s artistic director, managers, planning committee, crew and participating artists. The real festival costs are between \$60k to \$75k. We welcome any kind of donation, from art materials, to skills and time. Your support will help cover this year’s expenses and make next year’s festival possible,” says Inserra. “My hope is to inspire future generations of artists.”

The Details

To learn more about the Art in Nature: The Nature of Art Festival, visit www.artinnaturefestival.org. The free festival is 11 a.m.–5 p.m. Sept. 23 at Redwood Regional Park with events occurring on the Stream Trail and most easily accessed via the Redwood Gate and the Canyon Meadow Staging Area. Parking is extremely limited, but the festival offers shuttles from Merritt College, 12500 Campus Drive, Oakland (see “Getting There” on the website). The shuttle bus — occupied by trans-performers, or transportation performers — runs about every 10 minutes 11 a.m.–4 p.m., returning to the campus until at least

6 p.m. The cost to ride is \$5 for adults and \$2 for children under 12. Reservations recommended; bicycle and wheelchair accessible.