

Burning Man 2026: Mandalas of Connection Process Book



This project is a promotional video for Burning Man 2026. As an event advocating art, community and free expression, Burning Man is held annually at a temporary city in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. Participants (burners) design and build art installations, workshops, and activities. On the last day of the event, attendees burn a large wooden effigy along with the main temple, after which they clean up everything.

The act of building everything in eight days and then wiping them out, not leaving any trace, is much like the process of creating a Tibetan Buddhist Mandala. Just like monks destroy the mandala after painstaking work with sand to symbolize the impermanent nature of life, burners build and destroy the city in eight days, expressing art and self by means of creation and destruction.



The creation and destory of a Tibetan Mandala



The creation and destory of a Burning Man Temple

This visual project applies mandala approach because the Burning Man event is a spiritual journey for burners. In a desert with unstable internet connection, attendees truly live in the present and experience the flow of time. Billowing sand purifies their souls; burning flames burn their egos. In this real and absurd world, burners can be anyone, or just themselves.

In Tibetan Buddhist cosmology, the mandala is conceived through a dual framework: the "Living World" (Sattvaloka) — the realm of sentient beings — and the "Receptacle World" (Bhājanaloka) — the external world of environment, nature, and architecture. Inspired by this classification, I structured my Burning Man Mandala along the same cosmological axis.

The Bhājanaloka is rendered through a bird's-eye view of Black Rock City and main temples from past few years. The Sattvaloka, is embodied by five mandalas, each representing one of the five major American cultural identities, weaving together the spiritual landscapes, material symbols, and living memories of distinct communities into a unified, breathing whole.

The Receptacle World mandalas



Aerial View of Black Rock City

I uses some noise texture to suggest the sandy environment and apply contrasting colors scheme (bright warm for daytime and dark cold for nighttime) to represent time consciousness in the mandala.



I simulated the aggregation and dispersal of sand particles to visualize the formation and transformation of Burning Man's main temples across the years — each temple emerging from the remnants of the last, echoing the tradition of the Tibetan sand mandala. Just as these intricate mandalas are painstakingly created only to be ritually destroyed, Burning Man's main temples are built anew each year and ceremonially burned to the ground at the close of every event.



The living world mandalas

The sentient world of Burning Man is shown by close-up shots of burners, who often wear bizarre headsets and masks for radical self-expression and resisting sandstorms. In this visual project, the design of headsets is inspired by the aesthetics of ethnic groups in the United States, and each headset is followed by a mandala made from featured elements of that ethnic culture.

Since the Office of Management and Budget officially recognizes five minimum racial categories (White or European American; Black or African American; Asian American; American Indian/Alaska Native; and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander), I designed five characters based on these ethnic groups.



Asian American



Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islander



African American



European American



American Indian



For the Asian American, I referenced the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, China, because their traditional cloth usually often a unique veil design for them to survive in the Taklamakan desert . I painted the embroidery of pigeons on the veil, as the pigeon refers to the messenger of good news in the fold songs of the Uyghurs.

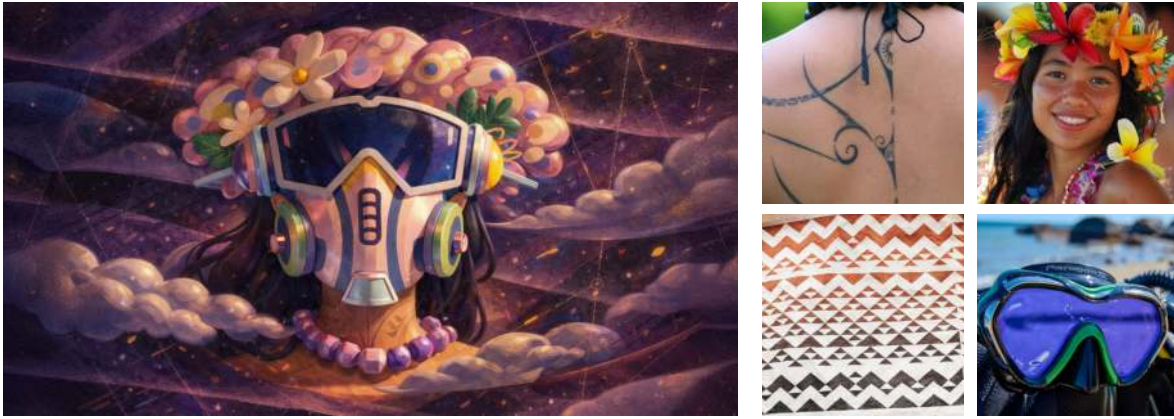
*The pigeons on your roof;
I will let it build a nest under my eave;*

...

*My pigeon flew away;
Fell into the lover's garden;
Burned in the lover's heart.*

(Translated from a Uyghur folk song)⁴⁵





I explored Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander mandala through four key visual elements: kakau (tattoo) patterns, which appear as tattoo on the main character’s neck; haku lei (floral crown), symbolizing connection to nature and the spirit of aloha; diving goggles, referencing Hawaii's deep bond with the ocean; and kapa cloth textile patterns, the traditional bark-cloth fabric whose geometric prints informed the circular decorative borders. Together, these elements create a dialogue between ancestral heritage and contemporary visual language.



The design of the American Indians is emphasized on the feather headset and the facial tattoos. His earrings are inspired by one of American Indian’s important symbols: the arrow. The mandala design harmonizes various Native American icons: the Tohono O’odham 'Man in the Maze' (the journey of life), the Medicine Wheel (cosmic equilibrium), and the distinct geometric aesthetics of Pueblo pottery and Navajo textiles. It also features patterns derived from Haudenosaunee Wampum, honoring their traditions of faith and communal compacts.





When designing the African American girl, I combined the zumba outfit with traditional African American textiles. I referenced an art piece by the Kuba artist Shoowa Group from the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. In the mandala representing African American culture, I drew inspiration from the rich legacy of Black music, centering the design around the iconic instruments of Jazz and Soul — the piano, drum kit, and trumpet — alongside the vinyl record, a timeless symbol of an era when African American artists revolutionized the soundscape of the world. These elements pay homage to the profound musical traditions born from the Black community, from the smoky jazz clubs of New Orleans and Harlem to the soul stages of Motown Detroit.



For the European American, I referenced Sorbs, an ethnic group from Germany, due to their impressive costumes. When designing the cloth for this Sorbian lady, I referenced the pattern on Sorbian eastern eggs. In the mandala representing European American culture, I incorporated the art of cross-stitch — a beloved needlework tradition carried across the Atlantic by European immigrants from countries such as Germany, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe.

