



A landscape architect by profession, Bill Tonnese is an ardent modern art enthusiast, Andy Warhol devotee, and a prolific—often provocative—artist in his own right. He's overseen controversial development projects in Tempe, including the transformation of several properties into large-scale public art installations. // Bill Tonnese

'Big Fun Art' Spreads to Phoenix

BEN IKENSON 2:41 PM ET

A risqué art exhibition housed in a 16,000-square-foot commercial building stands out among the typically more cheery immersive “museums” spreading in 2018.



Illuminated by floor-recessed lighting, the bottom half of a 1,500 square-foot subterranean room is suffused in pink, slow-curling fog. By one wall is a life-sized plaster-cast statue of a bare-chested woman, head concealed in cloth, holding a naked infant upside-down. A gaunt female model with an alabaster face saunters languidly through the space, like a mute witness to some macabre ritual. The 50 or so patrons, who each paid a \$30 entrance fee, tentatively explore the room's perimeter, wading through the puffy fuchsia tide, when a baritone voice registers through speakers:

“Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to be buried alive.”

Excerpt:

Inspired by a 2016 visit to Meow Wolf, national art critic for artnet News Ben Davis coined the term “Big Fun Art” in a piece that keenly predicted much of the current craze: “This kind of art’s influence is likely going to spread quickly from the margins, putting pressures on museums to embrace it or define themselves against it. You’ll hear MBA-style aesthetic rhetoric more and more.” Also, that the trend is “... what you get when art self-consciously models itself off of start-up culture, with its rhetoric of scalable growth.”

In another related piece, Davis addressed concerns stemming from this growth, cautiously assuring us that Big Fun Art does not necessarily equate to demise of culture:

Everyone likes a good milkshake once in a while. Milkshakes bring people together. And if you were taking your 13-year-old niece or nephew to something, you might suck it up and pay the \$38 for the Museum of Ice Cream rather than the \$25 for the Museum of Modern Art. But if your only plan to feed your nephew is to give him milkshakes, you are in trouble.

Bill Tonnesen knows he’s riding a wave created by the Big Fun Art phenomenon, but insists he is differentiating his efforts from the others he calls “selfie factories.”