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One of the most dramatic displays was the Serpent Mother—a 130-foot-long stainless steel snake armed with 40 pillars of fire.



Serpent Mother.

Photo credit: Kale Hutchinson.

Where Science Meets Art!

Beakerhead Festival combines STEM with the creative arts for a breathtaking spectacle

By Hans Tammemagi

Jump at Serpent Mother, a 130-foot fire-breathing serpent; gawk at Dreams Never Die, an abandoned house covered in thousands of coloured balloons; or at Sextant Tesla Coil, tap on a keyboard to make lightning jump across an 18-foot gap between a pair of 30-foot-high towers. Wandering around Calgary during the Beakerhead Festival will feel like you've landed on a different, bizarre planet. It's zany ... and so much fun!

Beakerhead started in 2012 as a way of making science interesting and accessible for ordinary people of all ages by combining it with the arts. People generally enter either

technical (science, engineering) or arts careers, yet it is precisely at their intersection where ingenuity lives. Beakerhead investigates and celebrates this intersection.

The organizers must have been pleasantly surprised at the event's immediate and immense success. Last year 153,000 people experienced some element of the five-day city-wide spectacle. Not only is it fun but you'll see how science plays a fundamental role in virtually every part of our lives. This year's event runs from September 18 to 22, and you can view more than 30 unexpected engineered installations and artworks, as well as participate in more than 20 events. There is also a variety of workshops and shows—

there's something for everyone, and it's all hands-on.

The main stage and the majority of the installations will be located at Prince's Island Park, with workshops and ticketed shows held at locations across the city.

In 2017, an enormous inflatable rocket and paintbrush were installed at two colleges to mirror the connection between the sciences and the arts. A tipi was set up outside an office building to relate the First Nations legend associated with the Big Dipper. One of the most dramatic displays was the Serpent Mother—a 130-foot-long stainless steel snake armed with 40 pillars of fire. As the sun set, the scene got wilder

with the installations throbbing with lights and fire.

"My favourite part is the artists," said Cleopatra Kierstead, Beakerhead's Program Director, "because Calgary turns into a giant outdoor art gallery. It's very immersive, very hands-on and I love learning about the artists' processes. The senses are ignited in so many ways with many moments of surprise and delight."

Founded by Jay Ingram, author and broadcaster, and Mary Anne Moser, CEO of Telus Spark, Beakerhead, which is a registered charity, was originally intended to promote education. But its overwhelming popularity quickly led it to expand. And this year it is a finalist for two awards: Best Festival and Best Family Event in Calgary. Not bad, considering it was not even intended to be a festival!

To stimulate creativity and to meet its educational objectives, Beakerhead involved 142 schools in 2018. Many were outside Calgary and joined in via Skype. More than 32,600 students participated in 2018 showing the popularity of creativity and thinking outside the box.

Beakerhead's shows are truly inspirational and magical. At Seven Wonderers, seven great minds in science share their personal stories explaining where and how they sought out creativity. You will be reminded to take risks and embrace life. This year, Dr. Hans Keirstead, a Canadian, now CEO at Aviva Biomedical, will be well worth listening to. He specializes in stem cell research,

advises government on health care and biotechnology and owns and flies a helicopter. Not your typical brainiac.


Many of the installations involve world class technology. Torrey Smith, the leader of the team from Silicon Valley, California, who created the giant Sextant Tesla Coil, said, "Beakerhead is amazing, and so much fun. It puts Calgary on the map internationally, and scientists from around the world look to this Festival to see what's developing." His team took three years to design and build the Tesla Coil. Smith particularly enjoyed watching the uninhibited excitement of youngsters playing the keyboard to make lightning flashes.

"Creating the Tesla Coil showed that top engineers could work together and successfully complete a difficult, complex project," said Smith. "It gave us the confidence to start a company to develop mini-robots that doctors can drive around the blood stream to perform operations."

Hopefully we will see, and maybe even get to drive, these revolutionary mini-robots at a future Beakerhead.

If You Go

The Festival runs from September 18 to 22 at Prince's Island Park and various locales in Calgary. For info and schedule: beakerhead.com

For Calgary tourism information: including accommodation and restaurants: visitalgary.com 

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