

May 13-14 festival kicks off season of outdoor events

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Sure, the Birmingham Fine Art Festival is a rite of passage — the gateway to warmer weather and days at the park. A sign that it's time to lose the laundry, and show some skin.

Held every year on Mother's Day weekend in Shain Park, the two-day festival has become a defining seasonal event. Typically, the festival occurs in mid May, sometime after the tulips are in full bloom, and before the suffocation sets in of sweltering weather and misadventures.

But a week before Shain Park in downtown Birmingham fills with 300 artists display booths, food vendors, a stage for musical acts and 80,000 visitors, there's another, less talked about ritual.

Festival organizers Jennifer Muir and Christine Winans, neither demonstrably prone to shyness, are reluctant to describe their ritual dance for good

weather.

Suffice it to say that both Muir and Winans use their impressive persuasion skills on a higher force of nature in the days preceding the outdoor event.

If a dance is required to coax away the rain clouds and attract pleasant temperatures, then so be it. Just don't expect pictures, they point out.

"For us, the Weather Channel becomes prime-time watching," said Winans, executive director of the Birmingham Bloomfield Chamber, co-sponsors of the festival, which is organized by the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center.

When art festival organizers are more concerned with the weather than the wide range of variables that need to be in place, it's usually a sign an event is running on automatic pilot.

That's not to say it doesn't take long hours and a coordination of many volunteers for the BBAC to pull together the artists, vendors and performers

Birmingham Fine Art Festival 2000

When: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday, May 13; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday, May 14

Where: Shain Park, and adjacent streets, downtown Birmingham
Features: 300 fine artists, food vendors, musical performers and children's activities

Admission: Free to the public

For information: (248) 644-0866

Proceeds benefit the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center.

for the annual show that raises funds for its operating budget.

This year, nearly 750 artists applied for only 150 openings. Among the 300 artists are 160 invited from last year.

Recently, BBAC's effort was rated 24th in *Sunshine* magazine's annual listing of top art festivals. Although landlocked

and smaller than the Ann Arbor Art Fairs and Paint Creek's Art and Apples, the Birmingham Fine Art Festival generates plenty of attendance and revenue for artists.

"Among artists, this is a well-known area because of the demographics — many people come to buy," said Allison Parks, who

teaches at the BBAC and is this year's featured artist at the festival. Parks' jewelry is exhibited at the BBAC gallery shop, Andy Sharkey Gallery in Royal Oak, and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History.

Four years ago, the BBAC and chamber entered a partnership to enliven what had become a somewhat predictable annual art fair. The goal, according to the BBAC's Muir, was to create a nationally renowned festival. The result was a name change from "art fair" to "fine art festival," an expanded performing arts lineup and broader participation from local businesses.

"The festival brings people to the city," said Winans. "There are immeasurable benefits. People come to the festival, go to the

restaurants.

"Maybe go shopping. But we realize we can't be all things to all people."

Coming a week before *Celebrate Birmingham*, the arts festival serves as a kick-off to the summer season of outdoor events, including concerts in the park, mid July's *JazzFest* and the *Dream Cruise* in mid August.

In addition, this year's festival has attracted more sponsors. That could be an indication, said Muir, that future festivals may add a title sponsor.

For now, however, Muir is more concerned with keeping her fingers crossed. And of course, performing the ritual dance for good weather, which translates into clear skies and pleasant temperatures.

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