



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Biennials & festivals // Review

Whimsy wins the day at Desert X's 2025 edition

Two hours east of Los Angeles, a road trip worth the journey to outdoor projects by Alison Saar, Agnes Denes, Jose Dávila and others

Scarlet Cheng

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Alison Saar's *Soul Service Station* at Desert X 2025

Photo: Lance Gerber, courtesy Desert X

Along a quiet stretch of Pierson Boulevard in Desert Hot Springs, California, past expanses of desert and shrub interspersed with tidy housing developments, people step out of their cars and head down a dirt path to Alison

Saar's *Soul Service Station* (2025). Smiles and chuckles abound as they reach the installation. These are the best moments at Desert X—the outdoor art exhibition set across the Coachella Valley and now in its fifth iteration (until 11 May)—the anticipation and mystery of the approach when the end is unknown, to then find something worth the journey.

Saar, with a wry nod to the legacy of sequential road signs, has lined the path with round signs sporting welcoming phrases. The first one reads: “At your service, we’re here for you: Soul Service Station. A quick stop for what you need to keep rolling.” These lead to a small square building that glimmers in the sun. Inside stands a metallic statue of Ruby, as the artist has dubbed her, a Black woman dressed in red overalls and holding a double-sided windscreen wiper at the ready.



Biennials & festivals

California's Desert X biennial to return in 2025 under Neville Wakefield and Kaitlin Garcia-Maestas

Jori Finkel

Saar tells *The Art Newspaper* that she wanted to explore the idea of being at a crossroads: “You can choose which direction you want to go to change your life. So it's kind of a wellness, healing space—you can come and shake off the past and look forward to the future.” A number of other objects fill the space, including, as Saar puts it, “restroom keys for the past and the future”.

The Coachella Valley is about two hours east of Los Angeles, and this year's edition of Desert X was curated by Neville Wakefield and Kaitlin Garcia-Maestas. Wakefield says they did not start with a preconceived theme, but there appear to be environmental and land issues explored throughout the 11 installations by as many artists that dot the area.



Ronald Rael's *Adobe Oasis* at Desert X 2025

Photo: Lance Gerber, courtesy Desert X

“Quite present in our minds was this idea of how human presence is impressed on the landscape,” says Wakefield, who has been the artistic director of Desert X since its inception in 2017. “We started thinking about architecture, and certainly there's an architectural subcurrent to the show. You have various iterations of that—with perhaps most obviously, Ron Rael.”



Frieze Los Angeles 2025

Out of the ashes: how California is learning lessons from the past on controlling wildfires

Jori Finkel

Ronald Rael's *Adobe Oasis* (2025) sits in an open field in Palm Springs, with zigzag adobe walls surrounding a single palm tree. At first, the work seems age-old and traditional—made as it is with earth, water and straw. However, the method of its making is very new: the walls have been 3D-printed in situ. Wakefield finds the project "particularly interesting, relevant, at least partly because of the fires in LA and the consequences of the way we build," he says. "So the fact that there was this ancient technique—it stays cool during the day, then it radiates heat at night."

Most of the Desert X artists are known for their outdoor installations. The New York-based nonagenarian Agnes Denes, a pioneer of Land Art, has designed several "living pyramid" structures into which local flora are planted in

tiers. Her latest is 30ft tall and installed in the gardens of Sunnylands, the former estate of the art collectors and philanthropists Walter and Leonore Annenberg. The tiers are filled with local plants and cacti, planted months ago to reach maturity just in time for Desert X. *The Living Pyramid* is an impressive monument to local flora, as well as an acknowledgment of the life cycle—the plants will not be replaced but rather allowed to decay.



Jose Dávila's *The act of being together* at Desert X 2025

Photo: Lance Gerber, courtesy Desert X

Meanwhile, Jose Dávila has combined massive marble blocks from a quarry in his native Mexico in his enigmatic *The act of being together* (2025). In an open desert expanse, the blocks are stacked in twos. Are the pairings referencing border crossings, human connections, the finished and the unfinished?

And in a public park, the Swiss artist Raphael Hefti has stretched a polymer band designed for fire hoses across 1,300ft, from a shrubby area to the side of a small mountain, in *Five things you can't wear on TV* (2025). The band is silver on one side and black on the other, creating

a division in the sky as it flutters in the wind—the artist dubs this "a glitch in the matrix".



Exhibitions

Mindful of its footprint, Desert X returns to the Coachella Valley and mulls expansion

Scarlet Cheng

Technology, of course, is ever with us. *To Breathe—Coachella Valley* (2025), a work by the conceptual artist Kimsooja, is a sleek and minimalist glass-and-metal spiral structure that visitors are invited to enter. The glass is coated on one side with an iridescent film and, when struck by sunlight, produces various bursts of light as visitors walk through. One can also see the ghostly apparitions of fellow visitors passing through the translucent glass.

For Saar's own rather nostalgic piece, she notes that whimsy is something she aimed for throughout her Desert X project. "We're so burdened," she says. "And I

know most of my work is very dark, dealing with sombre themes. But I wanted this one to be a space where you come and hopefully laugh, smile, relax and feel like all of this stuff that's happening in the world around us isn't necessarily who we are—and we have the opportunity to leave that behind, even if momentarily, and just aspire towards happiness.”

- [Desert X](#), *until 11 May, multiple locations, Coachella Valley, California*

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