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The forming of a new American dream: on site at Desert X

Will Jennings reports from the epic art festival in the Coachella Valley



Muhannad Shono
(Image credit: Desert X. photograph © Carlo Zambon)

BY WILL JENNINGS PUBLISHED 2 DAYS AGO IN [FEATURES](#)

Of all art biennials and recurring festivals, Southern [California](#)'s Desert X is one of the largest in physical expanse. Spread across over 480 sq km of Coachella Valley's diverse landscapes, the only way to navigate it all – perhaps suitably for the US – is by car. A well-designed handy app includes a map to help visitors plot their own route around the 11 site-responsive

installations found across desert dunes, rocky valleys, turbine fields, and formal gardens. With such driving required to tick off all the works, it might be useful to know where to refuel en route – though the map only includes a single, lonely service station across the whole of the artistic terrain.

Born in LA, artist Alison Saar understands the importance of gas stations, not only for car culture. Famously documented by Ed Ruscha and Edward Hopper, the traditional petro-macho convention is twisted by Saar with *Soul Service Station*, an architectural sculpture offering space to recharge the psyche. Inside the building are devotional objects created with local students, speaking to hope and healing, while the pump outside delivers a poem from Harryette Mullen through a conch shell instead of gushing oil. ‘When you think about the desert as being this landscape for opening your mind and letting go of all of those pressures’, Saar said of what she described as a ‘collaboration with the landscape’.



Agnes Denes
(Image credit: Desert X. photograph © Carlo Zambon)

By positioning poetics and reflection where one may expect the force of oil, Saar presents an alternative connection to land and place rooted in collective connection over extraction, a theme recurring throughout Desert X's curation from artistic director Neville Wakefield alongside guest co-curator Kaitlin Garcia-Maestas. With no single overarching theme, there are nonetheless connections to be drawn across the works, each of which collaborates with the landscape and environmental elements in different ways.

Sanford Biggers started his career in the LA graffiti scene, and his pair of pop-art clouds puncture the sky with a similar comic clinicality, shimmering sequins making the wind visible. With wind turbines spread across the valley floor and advertising signs lined up along the sides of freeways, Biggers' vertical interjections are totems of reflection inviting meditation and a slowing pace. 'It is an opportunity to meditate and dream,' Biggers said.

Another artist playing with light is Sarah Meyohas, who, born in 1991, is the youngest participant. Her work carries a maturity in form and spatial awareness: a white path leading from the road deep into the desert slowly narrowing and contorting into a sinuous wall that folds back on itself to create arch walls. Visitors can rotate and angle reflective discs until the title of the work, *Truth Arrives in Slanted Beams*, is projected across the white surfaces. Truth, of course, is slippery, and as the sun passes the carefully angled reflected words are destined to disappear.



Jose Dávila

(Image credit: Desert X. photograph © Carlo Zambon)

The oldest participant in Desert X, born 60 years before Meyohas, is Agnes Denes, who, while long-known for seminal 1982 work *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*, is finally receiving global recognition for a wider and deeper artistic output. Here, she also brings a slowness through a pyramid of plants set within the manicured, formal landscapes of Sunnylands estate. Her *Living Pyramids* have been erected in various locations recently, with the stepped planting of each iteration drawing from the local ecologies. In California, cacti and wildflowers reach skywards, alive with insects and bees, celebrating the geometry and order of the shape and surrounding formal gardens, while also allowing space for chaos, nature, and growth.

While a towering pyramid and glimmering clouds have a certain iconicism, and the scale of the landscape perhaps invites artists to engage with enlarged scale and aesthetic to contend with the natural awe of the locations, there is a

recurring anti-monumentality amongst the artists. Previous editions offered several large-scale interventions, visible from afar, but – perhaps reflecting the more delicate time in politics, climate, and culture the US and the world are now in – there seems a more delicate touch to this edition's works.



Ronald Rael

(Image credit: Desert X. photograph © Carlo Zambon)

Raphael Hefti has strung a taut fibre across 300m, coated on one side with a reflective finish, and while the work is vast in scale and engineering, it is subtly inconspicuous in presence. As the line ripples as wind and sun pass, a sharp geometric glimmer cuts across the hillside rocks as if symbolising the geological line marking the Anthropocene. It is 'a register of the invisible, of the very air around us and the climate,' the artist says of a work that visitors expecting grandiosity may find underwhelming – or even miss entirely dependent upon weather conditions – but again speaks to a light touch with landscape and place.

That is not to say that lightness of touch is also light in profundity. Spread across the Thousand Palms desert is Muhannad Shono's sculpture *What Remains*. As with Hefti's work, a casual observer may not notice Shono's intervention at first, or may even perhaps mistake the fabric land art sculpture as litter carried across the openness to get caught on resilient overgrowth – not a demeaning comment, but an idea present in the politics of the work. Interested in ideas of migration, memory and identity, the artist and his team have carefully unrolled lengths of fabric to align with the direction of the wind, burying some parts into the dune, allowing some ends to flail around creosote bushes.



Alison Saar

(Image credit: Desert X. photograph © Carlo Zambon)

The work speaks to current US political issues around immigration (and recent enforced *emigration*) as well as global migratory situations and our relationship to place. 'I grew up struggling with notions of home,' Shono says, '...here, the earth in this installation is also unable to settle upon itself.' Over

90 days of Desert X, weather systems and winds will not just change the artwork, but will intrinsically become co-author, mutating, forcing, covering, ripping or revealing the work. This is not art made to be subjected to market forces or the economy of the gallery, but instead it exists as a barometer for the forces of climate and culture beyond itself, and as such also speaks to predicaments of migrants, refugees, and those passing through places the world over. It is a work that may not survive the American landscape.

‘Time is an essential part of this show,’ Neville Wakefield says, ‘obviously, the work is always changing as is the environment around it, so we implore you to come back and experience it as many times as possible.’ The notion of temporality is present across many of the works: Hefti’s line only works when conditions permit; Denes’ pyramid will grow, flourish, and perhaps, die over the duration of Desert X; and Shono’s fabrics could get blown away, shredded by foliage, or bury within shifting sands. Time also plays into two works not installed by opening weekend – Kimsooja’s architectural experience of light and colour, and Kapwani Kiwanga’s sculptural mediation upon Palm Springs School of modernist architecture, speaking to migration and the Underground Railroad – both of which will reveal themselves to repeat visitors.



Sarah Meyohas

(Image credit: Desert X. photograph © Carlo Zambon)

Two of the strongest, most elemental, works involve material extracted from the ground, taking distinct physicalities though both equally present and powerful. Ronald Rael is both architect and artist, his work similarly straddling disciplines. *Adobe Oasis* is a mud-construction sculpture that fuses historic vernacular with futuristic methodology. Well suited to California, Rael's zig-zagging sculpture draws from adobe architecture, a mud-wall approach to building that can be seen across the valley, but formed using a dextrous robot arm, speaking to the technological nature of the state. The result has no pretence of the domestic or habitable, instead acting as both provocation and testbed for how we contend with a climactically challenging future. The form of the interlocking, freestanding mud walls, made by mixing earth with water and created over seven weeks, was formulated to test the extremities of the robotic arm that, strata-like, turned mud into sculpture. It

still took manpower, to navigate and coral the robot, to train it and collaborate alongside it, and the result stands as a Richard Serra for the age, speaking not to industrial but vernacular processes.

Rael nods to the domestic with a shallow rise of timber steps offering the visitor slight vantage over and beyond the sculpture. This, too, is as much experiment as artistic gesture – with many in LA and beyond unable to get insurance to rebuild properties post-fire, the work reminds us that to go forward we need to look back to how we lived over preceding centuries, and that to be progressive might not only mean signing up to techno-solutions, but to do so while aware of the patterns, behaviours, and slow embedded creativity of the past – all we need is earth, water, technology, and empathy.



Raphael Hefti

(Image credit: Desert X. photograph © Carlo Zambon)

This is all also present in Cannupa Hanska Luger's *G.H.O.S.T. Ride*, a mobile artwork that will move across the valley. The indigenous-futurist industrial-assemblage of a vehicle acts to explore how deeply-rooted knowledge of a land can be fused into technological imaginings towards speculative solutions that don't only work for us, temporary custodians of place, but for the very place itself. 'I pulled some of the technological forms of my people and reinvented it onto this vehicle, looking at indigenous technology as a 20,000-year proof of concept,' says the artist.

This fifth edition of Desert X arrives at a precarious time in US politics. Understandably in this climate, the curators don't lead with the inherent politics within the 11 works, but they are undoubtedly present throughout, even if secreted through the innocence of found materials, gentle gesture, and subtle undertone. This is perhaps all most redolent in Jose Dávila's stoic sculpture, *The act of being together*. It's a henge-like arrangement of roughly hewn stones, their critical mass and elemental solidity emphasised by rotating wind turbines surrounding it in all directions – the lightness of air reinforcing the weight of Dávila's material.

The rocks are marble, usually something carved into sensual statuary or polished into luxurious bathroom tiles, but here left as immense, irregular lumps, the shape they were when extracted from a Mexican quarry. The US-Mexican border is referenced through the migratory act of moving these stones, their newly shaped objectness in Coachella counterpointed by an extractive void in Mexico. They stand proud, glowing in golden-hour light, as if they were meant to be, as if they have accomplished their own idea of the American dream and found their celebrated place.

But we know that just as the stones' existence in the US is the embodiment of an absence in Mexico, the American dream as it has become is similarly rooted in precarity, inequality, and increasing aggression – as if one may only have a dream if another has a nightmare. But this idea of a dream need not be the case, and each of these Desert X artworks, in their own ways – related to

each artist's lines of inquiry, the specificities of site, and contention of the elements – speaks to how a new American dream may be formed. One festival of sculpture won't change the world and give all the answers, but viewers can start to think about how to dream – and art can shift from grandiosity and pomp towards a measured, reflective and generous understanding of one another and the places we collaborate with to mutually survive.

Desert X runs until 11 May 2025

<https://desertx.org/>

<https://www.wallpaper.com/art/exhibitions-shows/desert-x-2025-coachella-valley-review>