

'DESERT X' TREATS ARID SPACE AS A RICH CANVAS

by Jori Finkel



The artist Norma Jeane with a bot that will be part of the "Desert X" exhibition in California.
Credit Emily Berl for The New York Times

PALM SPRINGS, Calif. — Roaming off-road through sandy, rock-studded terrain in view of mountain peaks and windmill farms, a six-wheeled rover about the size of a milk crate backed up and sped away from its creator.

With infrared detectors to elude heat-producing objects and other sensors to identify solid forms, the bot is in effect programmed to avoid human interaction. She's known as a "shy bot."

"She doesn't have consciousness in the classical way, but she is sensitive," said the Italian artist behind the bot who, seeking to avoid celebrity himself, goes by the name Norma Jeane. "She does not want to be bothered."

The shy bot is one of 16 art projects spread across the Palm Springs, Calif., area from Desert Hot Springs to Coachella as part of the sprawling new exhibition "Desert X," running Saturday through April 30. The bot is also one of several artworks in the show that play with fantasies of the desert as a great existential escape: a refuge for anyone (or anything) seeking to shed the straitjacket of civilization, to vanish from sight or just be left alone under the purportedly sheltering sky.

Other disappearing acts include a mirror-clad ranch house designed by Doug Aitken to reflect and dissolve into its surroundings, a nuclear bunker by Will Boone buried in the sand that holds a sculpture of John F. Kennedy inside and photo-billboards positioned by Jennifer Bolande along the road in such a way so they blend into the mountain landscape behind them around dusk. (All works are free to the public, but some have limited hours.)

"The mythology is the desert is a place to go to find yourself, but in order to do so you have to lose yourself," said Neville Wakefield, the New York curator who directed this inaugural show. "It's about letting everything go in order to find something." (He said the "Desert X" board, which includes local cultural leaders trying to boost the region's reputation as a visual art destination, has not committed to any schedule yet — "biennial, triennial or unpredictable.")

The Marlboro Man of appropriation art, Richard Prince, found in the desert a bastion of lawlessness as wild as the internet he so often trolls for images. He has taken over an old home in Desert Hot Springs so derelict that it looks like it might have been a meth den in better days. He has not cleaned up the place so much as trashed it with his own art: printing on paper and vinyl sheets images of his Twitter posts about fictional lowlife relatives — “family tweets,” he calls the series — and plastering them throughout the property. Tweets are stapled to walls, pinned to the floor with rocks and tossed on the scrubby grounds outside, beside soda cups and dirty diapers.



Will Boone’s “Monument” features a sculpture of John F. Kennedy.
Credit Emily Berl for The New York Times

Those crumpled-up papers blowing across the front yard like tumbleweed? Yes, those are family tweets, too. One reads: “I put an ad in a swingers magazine and my mother answered.” The photos printed beneath the tweets range from tacky to pornography. Mr. Wakefield sees it as “a portrait of American family dysfunction” but also a self-portrait of the artist. “The house is the home is the head,” he quipped.

Of the 16 artists in “Desert X,” there are only four women — “and too many machos,” Norma Jeane offered when explaining the female gender he assigned to his bot. Asked about the imbalance, Mr. Wakefield said, “I’m not a quota curator.”

“The balance was more even at the early stages of conversation, but this is somehow what came out of it,” he said. “I don’t know if there’s a gender affinity with the desert, but historically a lot of the mythologies of the desert — starting with biblical examples of being cast into the wilderness — are male.”



"Curves and Zig Zag," Claudia Comte's wall at the base of hiking trails in Palm Desert.
Credit Emily Berl for The New York Times

As it turns out, the work made by women in Desert X proved less spectacle-driven and more contemplative. A sound installation by Lita Albuquerque (with performances not seen by this reporter) centers on a blue female sculpture with her ear to the ground.

The work of the Swiss artist Claudia Comte, a wall nearly 10 feet high and 100 feet long at the base of hiking trails in Palm Desert, might at a distance seem a critique of President Trump's plans for reinforcing the border. But up close, it's clear that the artwork is a painting as much as a wall, covered with repeating black S-patterns that gradually sharpen into zigzags as you walk along it. The wall appears to bulge in spots because of the curves, an optical effect that nods to Op Art painting as well as to heat haze, the shimmering visual distortion that can occur in the desert.

At another trailhead further west, near the base of the Whitewater Preserve, the Los Angeles-based Sherin Guirguis has built a domed, earthen sculpture like the pigeon towers popular in Egypt, where she grew up. The towers are typically used to breed the birds for food or sport (and, more rarely, for espionage missions). Her sculpture has niches for birds, but she doesn't expect any to actually use it; she wants viewers to wonder about its significance.



Sherin Guirguis's "One I Call" includes niches for birds.
Credit Emily Berl for The New York Times

"I hear people say the desert is a blank canvas," she said. "Actually it's full of life and full of histories; we just don't value them enough. I wanted to reach into the history of these desert communities that are often marginalized."

The Whitewater Preserve has a "carry-in, carry-out" policy for garbage. Ms. Guirguis has followed this approach for her work, too, using soil and clay from a nearby quarry and mountain spring water. The only imported material was jute, in the form of long sandbags she packed with soil to make the tower's building blocks.

Chances are the work will erode a bit because of rain and wind. At the end of the project, she said, she will hose down the surviving structure and take away the sandbags, so all that remains is a pile of earth.