

ART IN ARID CLIMES:
A REPORT FROM THE DUSTY WESTERN WILDS OF 'DESERT X'

by Catherine G. Wagley



Will Boone, Monument, 2017, installation view, in Desert X.
LANCE GERBER/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DESERT X

It took five of us five attempts, one phone call to a PR director, and about ten minutes to open the trap door leading down to artist Will Boone's contribution to "Desert X," the inaugural southern California desert exhibition that may become a biennial, depending on the response it generates and, of course, the availability of funding. Boone's piece, installed in an empty lot of sandy dirt off busy Bob Hope Drive, near the towering Agua Cliente Casino, had only been finished for a day, and it was already vandalized. The vandals had cut the lock, opened the trap door, climbed down into the modestly sized bomb shelter and defaced the pasty-faced sculpture of John F. Kennedy that sat beneath a single spotlight. A new lock, installed earlier in the day, would hopefully be harder to cut. The sun had started setting by the time we arrived at Boone's installation, after spending the day zig-zagging back and forth between Desert Hot Springs, Palm Springs, and Rancho Mirage. We had passed some of the same residential developments and strip malls a couple times as we exited and reentered Interstate 10 in the same places.

We began the morning at the Ace Hotel in Palm Springs, above the pool, and by mid-afternoon we were at Sunnylands, the unnaturally green estate built by billionaire Republican Walter Annenberg (complete with an artificial swamp). The estate has been called the Camp David of the West by its owners and by the "Desert X" brochure, which also refers to it as "a place of welcome and solitude," a description that sidesteps the fact that only 7.5 percent of it is open to the public and that President Nixon went there to escape public scrutiny during Watergate.

At Sunnylands, the artist Lita Albuquerque has installed a circle of sand in one of the courtyards behind the visitor center, putting an all-blue, full-size cast of her lounging daughter in the center. The installation recalls a sundial, with shimmering sand raked in a circular motion. Installing sand in this green landscape when sand is amply, naturally available so close by is a reminder of the excesses of Sunnylands, and indicative of how little "Desert X" strays from established paths, both curatorially and geographically speaking.

"'Desert X' was born out of a simple notion," Susan Davis, a collector and founding board member of the exhibition, said during the opening press conference at the Ace Hotel. The exhibition, Davis

continued, provided an opportunity to “learn more about the desert and how beautiful the desert is.” Then she handed her mic to the show’s artistic director, Neville Wakefield.



Will Boone, Monument, 2017, installation view, in Desert X.
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“The cliché of the journey being the destination is partly true,” Wakefield said. He described navigating the “16 amazing pieces” as a “self-narrated” experience, not mentioning that most of this narrative would play out in close proximity to Palm Springs and Rancho Mirage, cities where short-term rental markets are surging.



Lita Albuquerque, hEARTH, 2017, installation view, in Desert X.
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According to the exhibition’s brochure, the California desert “calls to Neville Wakefield like golf courses to retirees,” which is particularly comical since this exhibition and the New York-based European curator’s previous site-specific project, in Gstaad, Switzerland, have occurred in and around resort towns.

When news of a desert biennial started circulating in 2015, it was an exciting prospect. The history of artists working in the desert is rich yet fragmented. The narrative around Land Art—Michael Heizer’s Double Negative being a prominent example—is of course well-known, but other major pieces, like Noah Purifoy’s expansive Joshua Tree installation and Leonard Knight’s Salvation Mountain, remain marginalized, viewed as visions of outsider eccentricity, even though Purifoy was in no way an outsider. Artist Marjorie Cameron often disappeared into the desert in the 1960s and ’70s, as many L.A. artists did and still do. Nuclear test sites, border towns, water usage, military training sites, diplomatic meetings, tribal lands, solitude, expansiveness, economic depression—artists have

already explored all of this and more in the desert, but typically as part of solitary projects. Bringing such explorations together, and inviting new ones, promised to be a fascinating experiment. Philipp Kaiser, who co-organized MOCA's ambitious 2011 Land Art exhibition, was originally associated with the project. After Kaiser resigned in 2015, Wakefield took the helm, appearing on a panel at the Art Los Angeles Contemporary fair at the start of 2016 to discuss his plans.

"I think generally and kind of philosophically the draw of the desert has always been this blank canvas," Wakefield said then. "It's a place where anything can happen," where "that sense of human endeavor" has always encouraged experimentation. Over the phone a few days after the press conference, Wakefield cited the "idea of the West, Manifest Destiny" as general overarching inspirations, though such notions are especially charged in the wake of the Standing Rock Sioux's battle against the Dakota Access Pipeline and the harsh political realities surrounding immigration from nearby Mexico. (Manifest Destiny, after all, was used to justify the taking of Native American and Mexican land and other such activities).



Rob Pruitt, Flea Market, 2017, installation view, in Desert X.
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The majority of the 16 artists in "Desert X" are white and male—Richard Prince, Rob Pruitt, and Doug Aitken being among the most prominent. Four women contributed to the exhibition. "It's a process," Wakefield told me over the phone, describing the selection of artists and projects as organic. "It started in a more balanced place." He continued, "You face moments where you can also force it, or you go with the best works that you can possibly realize." The week before, journalist Jori Finkel had also asked him about the gender imbalance. "I'm not a quota curator," he said in Finkel's New York Times article. More diversity, both in terms of roster and sites, might have led to a more nuanced, provocative show.

Two "Desert X" installations appear on the grounds of the Palm Springs Museum of Art. In the lobby, Rob Pruitt has set up one of the flea markets he has been doing around the country for years, giving local artists a chance to sell their wares, though this version is cramped and more like a gift shop in its institutional setting. Jeffrey Gibson's 52-foot-tall wind turbine sculpture rises up from the outdoor sculpture garden. Triangles of pink, blue, and black coexist with exuberant, stylized text: "We are living!" "I am alive." "You are alive." "They are alive." The text, according to Gibson's statement on the "Desert X" website, refers to Palm Springs's current inhabitants and original indigenous people. One wonders how different this work would feel in view of impressive nearby wind farms, partly on Cahuilla tribal lands and largely benefiting oil companies.

Doug Aitken built a mirrored house in a semi-gated, under-construction development called Desert Palisades in North Palm Springs. Titled Mirage, it reflects the landscape around it, and thus it disappears into that landscape. While stunning at times, it's hardly unique. Phillip K. Smith, who for "Desert X" installed a circle of mirrored rods in an empty lot in Rancho Mirage, built mirrored houses in far-more-rural Joshua Tree in 2013. Glenn Kaino's Hollow Earth, installed in a specially built

rudimentary shed in Indio, also relied on mirrors to create the illusion of a tunnel that went on forever. The brochure for “Desert X” cites tunnels between Egypt and the Gaza Strip rather than much-closer tunnels between Mexico and the U.S. that would make the piece more politically on point. In any case, condensation on the second day of the press preview ruined the illusion, so all we saw was a shallow, blue-lit hole in the ground. Future visitors will hopefully be able to see it in all its glory.



Doug Aitken, MIRAGE, 2017, installation view, in Desert X.
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Especially given the potential of site-specificity and the rich legacy of what artists have done in the landscape before, it's hard not to feel that “Desert X” underutilizes the terrain and its baggage. In 1962, when Jean Tinguely constructed sculptures out of trash and took them out to Jean Dry Lake in the desert in Nevada, he chose the site because it resembled a nuclear test site used in the 1950s. He and Niki de Saint Phalle built bombs in their hotel room, took them to the desert, wired the sculptures, and then blew them up for over an hour. The footage appears nonsensical and insane, on one hand, but also eerily familiar, the odd sculptures exploding dramatically against a landscape that seems vast and immune to destruction. We know now that it isn't immune; nuclear testing left destruction in its wake.

For his contribution to “Desert X,” Richard Prince mined a different kind of destruction, taking over an abandoned compound in economically distressed Desert Hot Springs, about five miles north of Palm Springs. Prince left the detritus-filled interiors of a house and shed untouched. He plastered the outside with printouts of Instagram posts from a fictional family—an extension of what he has been doing in galleries that feels less pretentious in its unusual setting.



Richard Prince, Third Place, 2017, installation view, in Desert X.
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A photo of a nude girl with underarm hair had a caption reading “My sister 1968. In love with Bobby Seal,” and the words FFFFAMILY or FAFAFAMILY were spray-painted on the walls. More posts were held down with rocks or could otherwise be found blowing around or stapled to surfaces. White plaster sculptures of the artist himself stood around the grounds like lawn ornaments. People began taking them on the first day. Within a week, Prince’s installation had been so thoroughly pilfered that the organizers decided to close it to the public. They had suspected they would have to do so eventually, but not so soon. Another project by Norma Jeane, an Italian artist who took that name because he was born the night Marilyn Monroe died, suffered a similar fate: his “shy bot,” a robotic vehicle made to wander the desert alone, went missing, its data stream disabled.

The desert “is God without man,” reads the oft-used Balzac quote at the bottom of the “Desert X” website. Inhabitants of Desert Hot Springs and surrounding areas seem to disagree—and have made