

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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WHY DESERT X IS THE WORLD'S NEWEST MUST-VISIT ART FAIR

by John Gendall



Will Boone's Monument, 2017. Photo: Lance Gerber/Courtesy of the artist and Desert X

The Coachella Valley has long resisted easy categorization: iconic midcentury houses and dingy roadside diners, extravagant wealth and devastating poverty, and the refined aesthetic of Modernism Week and the grittiness of the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival. To this mix has now been added Desert X, a newly launched arts exhibition that commissions artists to create site-specific works throughout the desert landscape. For the first edition of what has been called a biennial exhibition, Desert X, open through April 30, includes a cohort of 17 artists, among them Doug Aitken, Will Boone, Sherin Guirguis, Richard Prince, Rob Pruitt, and Tavares Strachan.

Just what site specificity means in such an open and expansive landscape left much room for interpretation. For Jennifer Bolande, it was a way to represent the natural landscape itself, overlaid on the roadside billboards that are now as much a part of the environment as the mountains she pictures. For Will Boone, it was a chance to explore the network of fallout shelters that are derivatives of the same midcentury context that spawned so many of the area's now-iconic houses.

If there was a theme that cut through the body of work, it was the role of art as a way to frame the perception of an otherwise unbounded landscape. Sherin Guirguis, for example, built an installation modeled after the pigeon towers found throughout the Egyptian desert, creating an interior environment in which visitors can look out into the landscape through carefully placed apertures. Doug Aitken also curated specific

view corridors, but did so in the form of a suburban ranch house clad entirely in mirror. The effect of *Mirage*, as the installation is called, is kaleidoscopic.

Other works, meanwhile, resist a specific frame. Philip K. Smith III created a roadside ring of 300 mirrored posts, a kind of Instagram-era response to the form of Stonehenge, and, in one of the exhibition's most compelling works, Tavares Strachan installed neon tubes in 218 trapezoidal holes he dug into the desert floor; spelling out "I AM," the piece offers up different messages and experiences depending on whether visitors are on the ground or flying overhead on one of the region's busiest flight paths.

For all the different voices, architecture was something of a conceptual through-line. In a conversation with *AD*, the program's artistic director, Neville Wakefield, finds in the body of work produced for this first installment of Desert X a resonance—unexpectedly so—with architecture. "I don't know," he says. "There's something about the desert that makes a lot of people go back to primary structures."