

AMA *art
media
agency*

373



Organisez vos événements privés ou professionnels dans le cadre unique d'un des plus beaux Châteaux de Provence...



Château de Valmousse



04 42 57 20 08



Château de Valmousse
13410 Lambesc



info@valmousse.com

www.valmousse.com



DELEGATE YOUR ART
CONTENT PRODUCTION
TO AMA.

Simple... there is nothing better!

en.artmediaagency.com/services





Photo Justin Wolff

AMA

Direction of publication:	Pierre Naquin
Editor-in-Chief:	Phillip Barcio Carine Claude Stéphanie Perris Gilles Picard
Editorial office:	Stéphanie Perris Nahir Fuente
Author:	Phillip Barcio
Translation:	Fui Lee
Graphic design:	Pierre Naquin
Layout:	Nahir Fuente Pierre Naquin
Proofreading:	Laura Archer Carine Claude Nahir Fuente
Image editing:	Pierre Naquin

Contact:	news@artmediaagency.com
Distribution:	300,000+ digital subscribers



WANT TO KEEP UP WITH
THE ART WORLD NEWS?

There is an app. for that!

news.artmediaagency.com





PASSIONATE ABOUT ART?
SUBSCRIBE TO AMA.

It's free!

subscribe.artmediaagency.com





LA
NO



WIDE ANGLE

American West _____ **10**

INTERVIEW

Peter Coyote _____ **22**

REPORT

Desert X _____ **32**

ANALYSIS

Portland _____ **40**

ZOOM

Las Vegas _____ **50**

FOCUS

Seattle _____ **60**

PORTRAIT

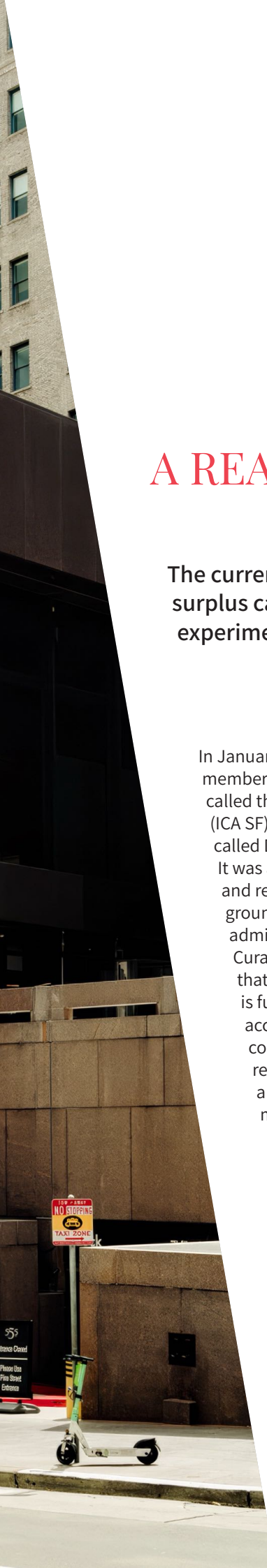
Kim Abeles _____ **70**

WALK



ICA SF

Photo Ulysses Ortega



A REALLY FREE ART MARKET

The current vibe in the art field in the American West has little to do with trends, surplus capital or art market fluctuations. It is more about community, experimentation and freedom.

In January 2022, San Francisco welcomed the newest member of its museum community — a scrappy upstart called the Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco (ICA SF). Located in an off-the-beaten-path part of the city called Dogpatch, it came out of the gate with idealistic visions. It was a non-collecting institution, in order to stay nimble and relevant; its programming was “artist-led, politically grounded and unapologetically experimental”; and admission was free. Meghan Smith, LYRA Foundation Curator and Communications Manager at ICASF explains that “the free part was particularly important. Being free is fundamental to our identity. It allows us to prioritise accessibility, equity and experimentation over commercial concerns. Keeping the museum free removes a key barrier to access and welcomes a broader spectrum of visitors who otherwise may feel excluded.” [see box p.14]

Roughly two years into its existence, the ICA SF left Dogpatch and moved to a boxy, former bank office dubbed The Cube, in the heart of the city’s financial district. Initially, ICA SF’s move to the corporate sponsored space, and its acceptance of significant corporate donations caused some alarm in the community. Some critics doubted the museum could accept that kind of commercial support and still uphold its idealistic curatorial and community vision. But this is San Francisco, a place welcoming of paradoxes. “We now sit at the heart of the city’s cultural and civic life, alongside institutions like SFMOMA, MoAD, the Asian Art Museum, says Smith. Accessible via all major public transport,

this location allows us to bring free arts programmes to the broadest possible public in San Francisco.”

One of the first exhibitions in the ICA SF’s new space was “Riverbend”, the first solo museum exhibition of Iraqi artist Maryam Yousif. Smith recalls, “A woman came in and remarked that this was the first time she had ever seen art by a contemporary Iraqi woman artist. She continued attending events and consistently brought friends in. These are moments that remind us why ICA SF exists, to reflect our communities and to create space for connection, recognition and joy.” The museum is still experimental, still artist focused and still free. Corporate money has not corrupted it. It has made it better. Things are not always what cynics say they are. Maybe being counterculture today means staying positive.

SF state of mind

In the late 1960s, San Francisco was the epicentre of a global counterculture phenomenon known as the Summer of love. To the outside world, the gathering





*A rock garden in the shape of a full-sized
soccer field (2024), Ayman Yossri Daydban*

Photo Lance Gerber. Courtesy The Royal Commission for Al-Ula

3 questions to... Meghan Smith

Meghan Smith is LYRA Foundation Curator and Communications Manager at Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco (ICA SF), San Francisco's newest contemporary art museum.

Why did the ICA SF recently move from its original location?

Our first Dogpatch building was deliberately chosen for its growing arts presence and it offered both the physical footprint and the cultural openness to house experimentation. The opportunity to relocate Downtown to activate two floors of The Cube — a striking building originally designed as Bank of America's flagship branch, opened up new possibilities and financial relief at a critical moment in our development. And, the building's raw, found spaces — very different from the usual "white cube" — are ideal for the kind of site-responsive, large-scale and immersive work ICA SF champions.

What were the museum's first exhibitions?

Christopher Martin's "Ancient as time" was ICA SF's debut commission and launched during our mid-construction phase. His large-scale textile works and soft sculptures reclaimed materials like cotton to explore Southern history and the African American experience. His work also included the first artist-designed ICA SF logo and a limited edition merch line. Jeffrey Gibson's "THIS BURNING WORLD" dug up long trenches in the concrete floor of the museum as a literal and symbolic land acknowledgement to the earth below our feet. Grounded in Indigenous kinship philosophies, the installation combined video, sound and sculpture to ask urgent questions about our relationship to the natural world and the impact of environmental harm. With "Resting our eyes", guest curators Tahirah Rasheed and Autumn Breon created a space for radical care, centring Black women and gender-expansive artists through the lens of leisure, adornment, and rest. Featuring new and existing works by 20 artists, the exhibition reframed softness and self-expression as forms of resistance. Together, these shows captured our founding ethos: to centre artists as civic voices, expand the boundaries of what an institution can be, and create space for reflection, joy and meaningful exchange.

How does the ICA SF blend political and cultural issues and aesthetics?

At ICA SF, we believe that aesthetics are never separate from the political; they reflect the values, tensions and possibilities of the moment we are living in. Our exhibitions are grounded in that understanding. On view now, for example, "Stay, take your time, my love" by David Antonio Cruz explores queer intimacy, chosen family and collective resilience in the face of rising anti-LGBTQ+ violence and discrimination. Masako Miki's "Midnight March" draws on Japanese folklore to build a mythological universe that challenges fixed notions of identity and belief. These shows are of course visually striking and technically rigorous, but also engaged with the cultural currents shaping our world. That is the kind of dialogue we aim to foster: one where art does not just reflect life, but actively participates in it. We embrace the idea that museums should be alive. Done right, they can be "third spaces" where audiences feel comfortable gathering, learning and maybe even expanding their assumptions. ICA SF operates without a permanent collection. That gives us the freedom to be responsive, to work closely with living artists and to prioritise the present moment over historical accumulation. It also means we can support risk-taking in ways that some traditional institutions often cannot.

looked as if hundreds of thousands of drifting bumpkins had suddenly descended upon the city's Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood to do drugs, freak out and sleep in the streets. The media dubbed these interlopers "hippies". Tourists flocked to see the strange creatures. At the height of the frenzy, an anarchic group of artists known as The Diggers staged a massive funerary march through the Haight-Ashbury. They carried a big coffin painted with dollar signs and the phrase "Death of hippie, son of media".

Peter Coyote [\[see p.22\]](#), one of the founding members of The Diggers, says the death of hippie parade was an example of what the group called "creating the conditions you describe". The idea was that someone could write a letter to the editor of the paper complaining about unfair coverage, or protest media corruption in the streets. But what would that achieve? The Diggers took a different tact. They blended street theatre with direct action to show the world the truth in such a way that the traditional media would have no choice but to spread their message for them. Coyote explains: "All a reporter had to do was write what happened and anybody who was awake could read that newspaper article and go, 'oh, I get it'. That is explaining what is really going on and breaking the hold that the corporate media has over communication."

Another core tenet of The Diggers was the *Free frame of reference* — the idea that if the stuff people need, like food, clothing and a place to live, was free, everyone would have a more creative and fulfilling life. As Coyote puts it: "why do you want to become an employee to make money to become a consumer?" If you got the basics for free, you could start



Meghan Smith
Photo Megan Kelly

A photograph of a teal chair with orange stripes, positioned on the right side of the frame. The background is a dark, starry sky with numerous small, golden-yellow stars and a few larger, four-pointed starburst patterns. The floor is a dark, reflective surface, showing a faint rainbow-like reflection from the chair. The overall mood is dreamy and ethereal.

Umbrella's whispers (Midnight march, 2025), Masako Miki
Photo Nicholas Lea Bruno. Courtesy ICA SF





Reuben Roqueñi

Photo Robert Franklin

doing what you really want to do. The Diggers were also all about inclusion and community. “Anybody who wanted to say they were a Digger, they were a Digger. We had no hierarchy and no leadership. The real core Digger belief was if you were anonymous, and you were doing it for free, not getting rich or famous, you probably meant it. Our hallmark was authenticity.”

Free access and inclusion are what the ICA SF is talking about. Those principles might seem diametrically opposed to a museum that survives on corporate sponsorship, but they do not have to be. The media portrays artists one way and corporations another. It portrays the rich and poor as members of opposing tribes. It teaches people that if something is free there must be a catch, somebody must be trying to fool us or indoctrinate us or scam us. That kind of portrayal riles people up, makes them click more websites and scroll more apps. The truth is more complex.

A successful art field has to be able to accommodate everyone. It has to address the cultural needs of the entire community. Artists are part of the whole city, part of the whole human community. People outside of the art field also have to understand that art and culture are fundamental to human existence. They have to support the arts in concrete ways or society will shrivel. San Francisco has learned that lesson — not perfectly, but it is striving. And it is not alone. In cities throughout the American West today, members of the art field are coming together to set market trends and conspicuous

consumption aside *in lieu* of community building, experimentation and free access.

Government assist

After his time in The Diggers, Peter Coyote joined the California State Arts Council. As Chairman, he advocated successfully that tax dollars should be used not just to support operas and symphonies, but also what he calls the artistic “mulch” of society — the artists, writers, musicians and performers doing creative work outside of the marketplace. Under Coyote’s leadership, California started paying artists full time wages to do half time work going into schools and teaching kids how to use both sides of their brain to solve creative problems. Truancy dropped. Teacher morale improved. The results were so positive that the Arts Council’s budget increased every year Coyote was Chairman.

Gülgün Kayim, the current Director of Arts and Culture for the City of Seattle, wholeheartedly embraces Coyote’s belief that society needs to incorporate the arts into every aspect of its existence and that the government has a role to play in making sure all artistic voices are included in that conversation [see p.60]. She is part of a city government that is overseeing one of the world’s biggest public mural programmes and overseeing the transformation of Seattle’s waterfront into a sprawling, art filled public promenade. The local art community is being nurtured throughout every aspect of these programmes. Because of the initiatives Kayim and her colleagues are undertaking, Seattle artists have a chance to continue

living and working in the city despite its rising cost of living. Kayim calls her approach “art based community development”.

In Portland, the city government takes a slightly different approach. Part of it involves an annual \$35 art tax paid by all city residents who make more than \$1,000 per year and live in a household that is above the federal poverty line [see p.40]. Funds from the art tax support working artists in the city, public art education and scores of non-profit organisations. Members of Portland’s art field are divided about the art tax, even when they benefit from it. They wonder about the fairness of a flat tax, and want more accountability for how the funds are spent. Those issues aside, they universally agree that the presence of a special tax for the arts signals something to the community — that art and culture matter to the people of Portland. That signaling has helped create an atmosphere of togetherness and cooperation in Portland’s art ecosystem that feels like a rising tide lifting all boats. As Reuben Roqueñi, Executive Director of Portland Institute for Contemporary Art puts it, “It is part of our curatorial work to be present in the work with our peers.”

Free spirits

In Las Vegas, the economy is about as transactional as it can get. The vast majority of funds sustaining the city’s businesses come from tourism. A significant amount of that money is spent on theatrical shows, but by and large tourists are not coming to Las Vegas to buy visual art. White walled commercial galleries that open in Vegas tend to

“Being free is fundamental to our identity. It allows us to prioritise accessibility, equity and experimentation over commercial concerns. Keeping the museum free removes a key barrier to access and welcomes a broader spectrum of visitors who otherwise may feel excluded.” — Meghan Smith

struggle and disappear. However, that spirit of freedom, experimentation and community prevalent throughout the American West today is bubbling in Vegas’s experimental artist-run spaces [see p.50]. More than a half dozen such spaces have popped up in the aftermath of the pandemic. They are showing some of the most interesting work in the country and building a strong and diverse sense of community in the process. Manny Muñoz, founder of Scrambled Eggs collective, sums up the mission every one of these spaces and groups says they prioritise: “I am always looking at it from the point of view of how we can use this for something beneficial to the community.”

In the desert between Las Vegas and Los Angeles lies the Coachella Valley. This land of geological and meteorological extremes is most famous for its namesake music festival, which attracts around 250,000 attendees every year and costs festivalgoers a minimum of \$599 per ticket. What is less well known is the valley’s other art festival: Desert X, the world’s first desert sculpture biennial [see p.32]. Desert X concluded its fifth edition in May 2025. It attracted 400,000 visitors. The 10-week event is completely free. It features some of the most visually striking and conceptually compelling outdoor artworks on the planet, then disappears without a trace. The fourth Saudi Arabian edition of Desert X will open in January

IN Al-Ula. That event is also free. According to Desert X Executive Director Jenny Gil, “these biennials are not only about the art. They are about bringing communities together around new ideas. The fact that Desert X is free and outdoors brings new audience into the contemporary art space, including families with kids and people with pets who may feel unwelcome within the environs of an institutional museum or fine art gallery.” Gil says these are some of the factors that make Desert X “a huge motor of cultural exchange.”

A couple hours drive from Coachella Valley is Los Angeles, which boasts the biggest concentration of Blue Chip galleries and well funded art museums in the American West. LA has a reputation for idealised things — beautiful beaches, expensive homes, celebrities and sunshine. It also has a dark side mired with poverty, natural threats and pollution. Kim Abeles has become a quintessential Los Angeles artist by utilising a medium that speaks to the more troubles of the city. The city gives it to her for free. She makes paintings using smog [see p.70]. Abeles made her first *Smog collector* in 1987 by attaching a stencil of the San Gabriel Mountains on a sheet of glass and setting the glass outside on the fire escape of her downtown studio for more than a month. She has continued making them for four decades, on a variety of surfaces. Abeles notes that wherever she is, it always looks like the smog is somewhere else, in the distance. But it is actually everywhere, all around her, all the time. She says: “we wear the city. You are not just in it, it is part of who you are.”

That statement sums up the prevailing ethos across the art community of the American West today. The people and institutions who are its driving force wear it. They are not just in it. It is part of who they are. Surely no one in the region can claim to have achieved the dream of The Diggers, where people no longer have to exchange the best years of their lives just to acquire the necessities of life. But from Seattle to Vegas to LA, and points in between, the choices being made in the art field are being influenced far less by market forces or trends, and more by an authentic desire for community, new ideas and free access to art for everyone.

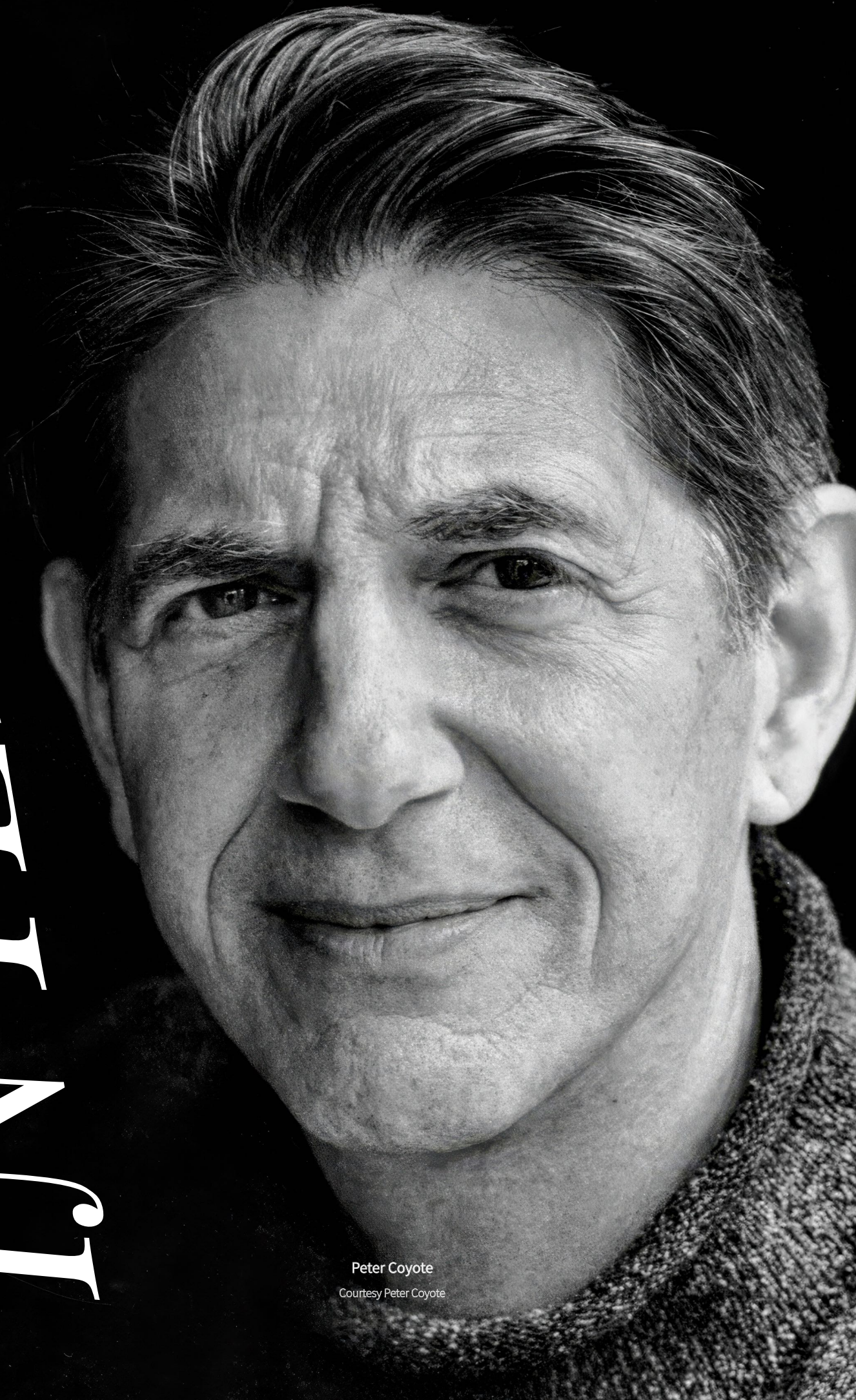




No. 1225 Chainlink (2023), Rana Begum

Photo Lance Gerber. Courtesy Desert X

INTERVIEW



Peter Coyote

Courtesy Peter Coyote

FREE FRAME OF REFERENCE

The Diggers, an 1960s counterculture theatrical collective in San Francisco, laid the groundwork for a freer, more loving and generous world. Their legacy is ours if we want it.

Spend a day in Sebastopol — a sleepy town in the heart of Sonoma County, north of San Francisco Bay — and you might see a living legend walking the streets. Peter Coyote is a renowned film actor, voice artist and author, as well as an influential political commentator and social reformer, and Zen Buddhist priest. But to his neighbours, or anyone else he meets face to face, he is just Peter, a guy who, as he says, “puts his pants on one leg at a time.” His list of past achievements and famous friends, alongside whom he has repeatedly made history, is less present in his mind than what we all might be able to achieve together next for humanity’s sake. Coyote says he is especially surprised, happily so, when someone wants to talk to him about The Diggers, an anarchic artist collective he co-founded in San Francisco in the 1960s, named after 17th century British agrarian socialists who upheld the apparently radical belief that food should be free.

From their base in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood, The Diggers transformed social preconceptions through a blend of street theatre and social actions. Their free food giveaways in San Francisco’s Panhandle park helped spark the movement that grew into the Summer of love. Their “free store” challenged the belief that society needs consumerism and hierarchy. They published scores of books and newspapers; collaborated with groups as varied as The Black Panthers, The Grateful Dead and Hell’s Angels; and inspired the early computer programming collectives that founded Silicon Valley. It is no exaggeration to say The Diggers were the primordial ooze from

which 1960s and 1970s American counterculture evolved. Where, then, is the group’s contemporary legacy? According to Coyote, it is wherever anyone who says they are a Digger wants it to be.

How did The Diggers begin?

Emmett Grogan and Billy Murcott were the secret geniuses of The Diggers. Emmett was this charismatic young Irish New Yorker. He joined the San Francisco Mime Troupe, which was a radical street theatre I was a member of. We were like little revolutionary heroes going around to the parks to where the people were. We did not charge for our performances. We passed the hat. That is how we got by. We got arrested for doing shows without permits. And Emmett and Billy challenged us. They said, you own the stage. So even when a drunk gets up there, you guys can manage it within the framework that you own. It is not actually a democratic operation. You can use your skills to create events that would involve people in theatre, whether they knew it or not. That would challenge the premises of profit

The Diggers at Fort Mason

Considering how essential The Diggers were in establishing San Francisco as a counterculture mecca, it is surprising how few San Franciscans today are aware of who they were or what they did. Bay Area artist Ben Kinmont is working to change that, most recently with his exhibition “Our commons are free”, on view through 10 August 2025 at San Francisco’s Fort Mason Centre for Art and Culture. “The exhibition is looking at The Diggers through the lens of a printing history, Kinmont explains. There were four important presses The Diggers established between the fall of 1966 to the beginning of the 1970s. The show is structured around the different publications those presses produced.”

On view in the show are reproductions of *The Digger Papers*, broadsides that presented the group’s revolutionary vision and ideas. There are also papers, broadsheets, leaflets and pamphlets produced by The Communication Company, the arm of The Diggers that reported on life as it unfolded in 1967 in the Haight-Ashbury. Next are publications by the Free City News, a full scale news agency that helped expand the movement beyond San Francisco. Finally, it includes examples of *Kaliflower: the Intercommunal [Free] Newspaper*, a periodical distributed to a network of around 300 Bay Area communes, that was playfully named for the Hindu word *kaliyuga*, for humanity’s apocalyptic period.

“We are going to exhibit about 120 examples of what the four print shops printed, along with film footage,” Kinmont says. “Our commons are free” also includes historical photos and other ephemera documenting the history and legacy of The Diggers. Kinmont, whose work has been presented internationally, including at Documenta 11, will also be handing free reproductions of Diggers papers out to people on the street around the exhibition locale. He is known for giving works away from his exhibitions. The gesture aligns him with The Diggers ethos, the *Free frame of reference*. Kinmont is also creating a Digger *Free store* in conjunction with the exhibition. He says, “I do these things in the visual art world even though The Diggers had no connection to that world at that time. Their main connection culturally was through literature, through the beat poets and the theatre. Those were the arts they were involved in. The fact that they were focused on anonymity and decentralising the role of the author, those things do not sit well with the visual art world. That world wants a name and something to invest in. The Diggers spurned that.”

a spoon. And you had to step through a six foot by six foot yellow frame we built called the *Free frame of reference*. You get it. When you stepped through it, we invited you to look at a world through a free frame of reference. We are not feeding you because it is a charity. Like people would say, no, I can afford food. And we would say, would you not like to live in a world with free food? And they would go, oh, yeah. Then the evolution of that was the free store, which in its first incarnation was just boxes with everybody’s garbage. It evolved into a beautiful storefront, glass counters and we had everything in it. Televisions, radios, tools, bicycles, clothing, furniture. And the subtext was, why do you want to become an employee to make money to become a consumer? We will give you the shit. Now, what do you really want to do?

Was the *Free store* theatre?

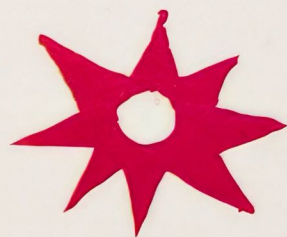
It was consciously theatrical. If someone came in and said, who is in charge here? We would say “you are”. And if you just stood there with your mouth open to look stupid, there was no sense blaming the pigs or the system or private property. You had been offered a gift to employ your imagination and you failed it. But if you said, I am in charge, well, I hate this, then we just changed the store the way you wanted it. The *Free store* became a pretty interesting centre. We got a whole bunch of draft card blanks. Young people were being shipped out to Vietnam from San Francisco. So soldiers would wander in and, with a little delicate discussion, they could hang their uniforms up in the rack and put on some different clothes. We always told them to keep the boots. And Bobby from Chillicothe would leave as Timmy from Memphis. They would just desert and have ID that could pass muster. That was kind of the way we did it.

and private property. So the first thing we did was we began feeding people in San Francisco, in reaction to the city’s hard heartedness. The city was getting fat and sassy off tourists coming to San Francisco to see the Haight. They were sending buses down through us like we were orangoutangs, you know? But these kids were showing up from all over the country and they were hungry. They were sleeping on the streets.

The city did nothing. So we decided to feed them. We went down to the farmer’s market and they would not help us. So we sent our women down there with babies at their breasts and they got tons of food, which we cooked up in these big 25 gallon milk cans. We brought them to Golden Gate Park and we put the word out on the street. We passed flyers out. All you had to do to get a meal was bring a bowl and

KEEP

A FREE FRAME
REFERENCE



AT

1711 HAIGHT ST.
OR WHEREVER
FREE STORE
CALORE



Free store (c.1967)
Photo Chuck Gould



And as we grew, we attracted other groups like the Free bakery in Oakland and the Up against the wall motherfuckers from New York. Gradually we evolved into something we could not call The Diggers anymore. We called it the Free family. And the Free family still exists. I am on a circuit with 108 people who give money every month. We support about 15 people, something on top of their social security so they can have a little grace in their old age. We may have had to get work to take care of our children, or the communes ended because we did not own the land, but nobody gave up their beliefs and their fundamental ethics. So that is The Digger heritage. I am proud of it, but we were all artists.

Was it important to let people have their own ideas about your actions?

We had to trust they would get it. One day I was running the *Free store* and there was an elderly woman in there and she was going through shit and I could see she was stealing. So I went up to her. I said: "excuse me, not to bother you, but you cannot steal in here." She said: "I am not stealing." I said: "no, but you think you are stealing. But this is a free store. You just take what you want." She said: "is it really free?" I said: "yeah. Take what you want." She said: "well, if it is free, get out of my face!" Two days later, she came back with a flat of day-old donuts and put them on the counter. So this woman understood a gift economy. So we did not prescribe. Anybody who wanted to say they were a Digger, they were a Digger. We had no hierarchy and no leadership. So we never got infiltrated. The real core Digger belief was if you were anonymous and you were doing it for free, not getting rich or famous, you probably meant it. Our hallmark was authenticity.

Please explain The Digger phrase "creating the conditions you describe".

"Creating the condition you described" was a way that we manipulated the media to do what we wanted. For instance, when we had the Death of hippie parade. We had a parade and we had a coffin and it said, "Death of hippie, son of media" and had dollar signs all over it. We did not call ourselves hippies. The word "hippie" was invented by Herb Caen, the same guy who invented the word "beatnik". It was designed to be diminutive, to infantilise people who were threatening and challenging the *status quo*. So we wanted to say that. So we created an event, a big, motley parade with a coffin saying, "Death of hippie, son of media". Everybody had mirrors. When people came up and looked at us, we held the mirror up to them so they saw themselves. All a reporter had to do was write what happened and anybody who was awake could read that newspaper article and go, "oh, I get it". That is explaining what is really going on and breaking the hold that the corporate media has over communication.

After The Diggers, what did you do?

I ran the California State Arts Council for Jerry Brown. I was the chairman from 1976 to about 1980. Then they passed a law that I could not do it anymore. But we revolutionised the ways of talking about art, which had become like entertainment and decoration signalling available surplus capital. You hang expensive paintings on your wall, have expensive sculptures and go to expensive musicals and plays. It is more a class and status thing than an actual artistic exploration. You have to remember that it was Nelson Rockefeller and Peggy Guggenheim that decided to use Abstract Expressionism as a counterweight to Russian culture.

They started giving all this money to Abstract Expressionists because it had no politics in it. The abstract artists got elevated to a class above everyone else by the infusion of all this money. The exact same thing happened in the Haight-Ashbury when the record companies understood that the rock 'n' roll light show stuff was big money. They started passing out \$100,000 advances to the guys who were in our neighbourhood. They were just guys, you know, just musicians. And all of a sudden, the Haight-Ashbury was striated into the rock people who had all the money, and then they had the best dope and the coolest clothes and guitar straps and boots, and everybody was just "oh so happy to work for them". But it was a repeat of what Guggenheim and Rockefeller had done. The result of that is that the intention of the artist changes, because of that influx of capital. The artist becomes a brand. So instead of just doing visual explorations with your work, you become known, you become a commodity. All the publicity starts to operate. The galleries become super important, the ones that can get top prices. And all of a sudden you get the same pyramidal structure.

How did you address that on the Arts Council?

I basically took the position that, look, you cannot grow tomatoes without mulch. If you only give money to the big things, you are paying attention to the tomatoes, but the community artists are the mulch. You know, if you go to Paris in the early 20th century, it was not just Picasso and Matisse. There were hundreds of artists drinking coffee, arguing theory, doing stuff, seeing one another's works. And out of that thriving scrum, you develop a culture. We were going to support the culture of community in California. But then the governor

The real core Digger belief was if you were anonymous, and you were doing it for free, not getting rich or famous, you probably meant it. Our hallmark was authenticity.

— Peter Coyote

had to call me in. He said: “you know, Pete, in a democracy, all boats rise or all boats fall. You cannot play favourites.” And I realised: “oh, yeah, it is everybody’s tax money.” Everybody has a right to see their culture represented. I had to go around to all of these conservative operas and symphonies and ballets and apologise. I said: “I did not understand. I oversimplified things.” But we worked it out. We made peace. We started this incredible campaign. My budget went from one to five million. The next year it went to eight million, then it went to 11 and then 16. Finally it was 18 with federal money and stuff. So what I learned from that was that to be successful, I had to get off my high horse. I had to learn how to talk to conservatives. I had to learn how to talk to country farmers. I had to learn how to talk to all kinds of people. And that is what gave me the courage to try to go to Hollywood. Because I realised I was no longer constrained to be in the counterculture. I had learned to talk to the whole bandwidth of California.

Did the Arts Council give money directly to artists?

We said: “if you want to get money from us, we are not going to give you money to make art. We are going to pay you for services. We are going to give you enough to live on for a halftime job. You will make the art for free.” What we sold the legislator on, and they understood this, was that artists are creative problem solvers. You get a hunch. You make a slash of colour. You write a line of poetry. You write a line of

music. Then you step back and address it with your intuitions. By going between logic and intuition you use both hemispheres of the brain. We pointed out to the legislature that once kids had the experience of using their whole selves, they would never go back. We sent artists into the schools. They teach kids, say, how to do a mural or how to graph a drawing. So the big thing we did was we integrated the artists and the community. All of a sudden, we created a huge ecology of the arts. And in our schools, we did find out that truancy diminished by more than half. Janitor overtime for cleaning up graffiti disappeared. Teacher morale improved. Student behaviour improved.

Is that the difference between action and activism?

I never use the word “activist”. That word was invented by my enemies. You want to separate someone out from the broad mass of people, you put an IST after them. You make them a socialist, a communist, an artist, an activist. The subtext is that most people do not act on their beliefs and that is the norm. Then this small radical subset of people that are not quite like the rest of us, they are the troublemakers. Well, I turn that around and I say, if you do not act on your beliefs, you are a hypocrite. I am not an activist. I am engaged in my life. And part of my life are the political forces that swirl around me. I am unapologetic about it. One of the big debates about art when I was on the arts council was called arts for art’s sake. That is the philosophy of rich people. Just make it beautiful. It does not have to mean anything, it just has to mean we are rich enough to buy it. Then there is the art of protest, where people are talking about issues that impact their life. And that, of course, is frowned on. But how can you live your life and not address the issues? How can you do it? You know, you can do it if you never want a passionate discussion at the dinner table. We got in this shithole bag we are in because people are saying: “what is best for me?” The Diggers always wanted everybody to win. They wanted everybody to come up. Emmett and I spent a weekend in New York. We met everybody. We met Andy Warhol. We met Lou Reed. We met all these guys. Leonard Cohen. I got in a fight with Leonard Cohen the first time. These guys were brilliant. They were really talented. But they were just dripping with ambition. They were “me first”. Emmett and I spent two months there. We were bored. We wanted to get back to San Francisco. We wanted to get back to where people knew how to cooperate. So, you know, the real dividing line is are you a “me” person or are you a “we” person? I am interested in “we” people.



Diggers
ARR



Diggers

Photo Jim Marshall





REFLECTION

Dung Bara (2025), Ibrahim Mahama
Courtesy The Royal Commission for Al-Ula



“NO” IS WHERE THE WORK STARTS

Desert X, the world’s preeminent desert sculpture exhibition, just concluded its fifth edition in California’s Coachella Valley. Its fourth Saudi Arabian edition opens January 2026.

There are plenty of good reasons not to hold an outdoor art exhibition in the desert. It can be brutally hot in the day and freezing at night. Winds can top 200 km per hour. A host of scary creatures call the desert home and would be justified in attacking art tourists. Those same tourists also might also cause irreparable harm to the ecosystem. As a resident of California’s arid Coachella Valley, Susan Davis was aware of all of those factors when she founded Desert X, the world’s first desert sculpture biennial. Call it instinct or vision, Davis sensed the challenges could be overcome and it would be worth it. Her confidence came in part from a visit to the Cartagena Biennial in Colombia, where the artworks are integrated into the urban environment. That experience so moved the former art history professor that she convinced her desert community back home they could do something similar in their own backyard.

Most people know the Coachella Valley for its namesake music festival. Held each April, that two-weekend event attracts an estimated 250,000 attendees to this remote locale near Palm Springs, about a two-hour drive from Los Angeles. The 2025 edition of Desert X attracted around 400,000 visitors over the course of its 10-week run. There is some crossover between audiences, but Desert X attracts more interest from the people who live and work full time in the area. With the sculptures scattered throughout the Coachella Valley — which is about 80 km long north to south, and 32 km west to east — Desert X is particularly conducive to visitors who are able to travel to different sites over multiple days. Its natural setting and contemplative vibe also make

it more welcoming than a music festival to families with kids and people with pets.

Not that Desert X is any less spectacular than its musical cousin. But instead of a fury of sound and celebrity, the spectacle comes from the curiosity of esoteric forms inhabiting a dustbowl wilderness. Jenny Gil, Executive Director of Desert X, is part of the team responsible for selecting those esoteric forms and overseeing how they are built, installed, maintained and removed. Gil explains that for each edition of the biennial, new curators are brought on board who, along with Artistic Director Neville Wakefield, invite a whole cohort of artists to visit the valley and propose installations for specific sites: “I always tell artists to pick three sites and tell me which is your preferred one, and your second, and third, because we do not own any of the land where Desert X takes place. It is all a negotiation.”

Everything is political

In that sense, every aspect of the exhibition is political. “We are going

— *Phillip Barcio*

into the community saying, this artist wants to do a project, basically in your backyard or on this land that has been empty for centuries. We work with the local tribes in order to evaluate the cultural sensitivities of the lands where the exhibitions take place. Then the other major consideration is environmental. Obviously, everything we do as humans has an impact on the environment.” The team works with different organisations in order to mitigate the environmental impact. They do not work in sites that are environmentally fragile or close to sensitive or protected areas. They work with environmental design agencies to construct temporary access paths for viewers, from wherever they park on the side of the road to the artworks. They work with artists to install the works and remove the works in ways that, according to Gil, often leave sites better than they found them. “A lot of the lands used for the biennial are not regularly maintained, says Gil. There is a lot of trash in the desert.” Gil and her team also organise a lot of public programs that educate everyone involved about the desert environment. “We invite botanists to speak with artists about the environments where the artworks take place. So we really strive to leave no trace after the exhibition and to leave the sites as if nothing had happened there.”

Those parameters can be challenging for many artists, especially if they are used to developing their ideas in isolation in a studio, then simply planting the finished works in a gallery or a museum. It is one thing to negotiate with a fabricator, a collector or a museum board. It is another to negotiate with a natural environment on the scale of a desert and to ensure every material

and technique used is non-toxic, culturally sensitive, stable enough to survive two months exposed to extreme elements and yet ephemeral enough that the work can be removed without a trace. Some works from past editions have been fully biodegradable or otherwise disposable in an environmentally neutral way. For example, Eduardo Sarabia’s installation *The Passenger* for the 2021 edition was completely made from organic palm fronds. Or Ronald Rael’s sculpture *Adobe Oasis* for the 2025 edition, which was entirely made from 3D printed mud.

“We have had many unrealised projects, says Gill. For example, last year we invited 25 artists to come and visit the Coachella Valley. Curators took them around for about two or three days, sometimes a bit longer. They discovered the valley. They researched topics or people or organisations that they were interested in. Then they went back to their studios and came back with a proposal. We received back more than 20 proposals. We pay the artists for this process. Then we started value engineering the proposals to see what can be done. We worked with our production team that includes engineers and architects

Viva Marilyn!

Art in Palm Springs cannot be addressed without at least some mention of Marilyn Monroe. She was allegedly discovered there by a Hollywood agent while having her picture taken by the pool at Charlie Farrell’s Racquet Club. Later, she rented a house in the city, at 1326 Rose Avenue, and was frequently seen around town with her husband Joe DiMaggio. But the reason she is so associated with the city’s art scene today is because of a monumental sculpture that has become synonymous with Palm Springs, called *Forever Marilyn*. The sculpture depicts Monroe in a pose from the scene in the movie *The seven year itch* where her dress is blown by an air grate, exposing her underwear.

Forever Marilyn was created in 2011 by artist Seward Johnson. It was originally installed in Chicago, but after repeatedly being vandalised it was moved to Palm Springs the following year. Two years later, it embarked on a five year tour of various other locales, including several museum retrospectives of Johnson’s work. Everywhere it went, *Forever Marilyn* attracted a mixture of love and hate. After being exhibited in New Jersey, it was then unceremoniously disassembled and put in storage. In 2019, the Mayor of Palm Springs stepped in and announced *Forever Marilyn* would be returned to its desert home for three years, after which time the economic and social impact of the sculpture would be assessed.

Again, *Forever Marilyn* attracted derision, both from puritanical individuals who were opposed to the sexual nature of the pose, and from people in the art world who disliked the artist. Johnson was largely a self-trained artist who made hyper-realistic sculptures, including life-sized replicas of famous scenes from art history, such as a painted bronze and aluminium reproduction of *Luncheon of the boating party* by Renoir. Whatever art world elites think of him, however, Johnson has far more lovers than haters — as does *Forever Marilyn*. Palm Springs officials recently declared that the statue will be a permanent part of the city’s public art collection. In January 2025 it was moved to its forever home in Downtown Park, about 160 metres from the entrance to the Palm Springs Art Museum.



Forever Marilyn (2011), Seward Johnson

ARR



Unsui (Mirror, 2025), Sanford Biggers

Photo Lance Gerber. Courtesy Desert X

and project managers to figure out how these projects could be realised and whether they would sustain the very difficult conditions of the desert, which we do not control. The temperatures are extreme. Everything needs to be built for 210 km per hour wind. We are also very close to a lot of seismic activity, right on top of the San Andreas fault. So yeah, there are a lot of unrealised projects, not because the projects were not good, but because not every project is possible.”

There are also financial realities to consider, since they do all their own fundraising each year. A lot of proposals are amazing in a conceptual sense, but would cost hundreds of thousands of euros to realise. “We are a temporary exhibition, so you know everything needs to be scaled to the desert conditions, but also the temporality of the show.” There are occasionally works that have the capacity to have a second life after the exhibition, although as with all site specific sculpture that is the exception rather than the rule. Nonetheless, some can be disassembled, then reassembled later in another context, such as *Unsui (Mirror)*, the cloud installation Sanford Biggers made for the 2025 edition, which has been re-installed in Paepcke Park in Aspen for the summer of 2025. A work also sometimes lends itself to acquisition by an institution. Such was the case with Jeffrey Gibson’s sculpture *Alive!*, which debuted in the first edition of Desert X and is now permanently installed in the sculpture garden of the Palm Springs Art Museum.

Desert X Al-Ula

Gil and her team have faced a slightly different set of challenges with the Saudi Arabian iteration of Desert X, which will open its fourth edition in January 2026. It takes place in Al-Ula, an ancient oasis city in Saudi Arabia’s Medina Province. “Land ownership is very

different in Al-Ula than in the Coachella Valley, explains Gil, but there have still been negotiations. In 2020, the first year, some of the lands the artists and the curators had identified for works to be shown on were being used by camel farmers. These people are just, you know, minding their own business, as they always have and suddenly they are being approached by an artist who is talking about seemingly crazy ideas and projects that no one has asked for.” Although they work with a local partner in Saudi Arabia that helps organise the exhibition, those types of negotiations have still not been easy Gil says.

The impetus for Desert X to expand to Saudi Arabia came from a Saudi artist who attended the first edition of Desert X in the Coachella Valley. Gil recalls that he was amazed by the project and came to them and said he wanted to find a way to do a similar project back home. That same year, 2017, Saudi Arabia happened to create the Royal Commission for Al-Ula, which was given the mission of preserving the history and developing the future of the ancient site. Tourism and cultural offerings were central to the organisation’s plan. Three years of negotiations and conversations later, the first iteration of Desert X Al-Ula opened with the participation of 14 artists. “It became a huge motor of cultural exchange between artists in Saudi and artists outside of Saudi.” About a third of the artists participating in Desert X Al-Ula are Saudi. Another third are from the larger MENA region and the rest are from other countries abroad. The most exciting part for Gil is that the artists are meeting in person during installation and at the opening. Saudi artists are interacting with artists from outside the region and Western artists are discovering immensely, highly qualified Saudi artists with whom they were not previously familiar. There is also a transfer of values

happening. For example, the artist contracts being used in Saudi Arabia are modelled on the California contracts and there is a gender balance represented in the curation. The Saudi edition is free to attend, just as it is in California and there are also educational programmes being offered for the public.

Asked what advice she would offer to anyone else out there in the world thinking of organising a desert sculpture exhibition, Gil laughs and says, “Just do not!” She then smiles and develops: “If you are going to do it, spend time in the community first. Make sure what you want to do is relevant. The first thing you will run up against is push back, that nobody wants this. In the initial phase of the first edition of Desert X, that is what it was — just, why are you doing this? Why are you bothering us with this? And we still get that now. When we go to permit offices, local government organisations where we need to get a land use permit or a building permit or events permit, the first answer is always ‘no, you cannot do this’. Often the reason is because it has never been done.”

The most visible recent example of this was Ronald Rael’s project *Adobe Oasis*. Rael is an architect and an artist, and he is apparently the first person to 3D print a structure with adobe. “He is really challenging these traditional technologies with contemporary and future technologies, which was a huge challenge at the building and permits office at the City of Palm Springs, because there is obviously no precedent for 3D printing adobe structures, explains Gil. So how do you issue a permit? How do you make sure you know that it is within the code? And how do you make sure that it is going to be safe? So usually the answer is always ‘no’. And that is where the work starts.”





Truth arrives in slanted beams (2025), Sarah Meyohas

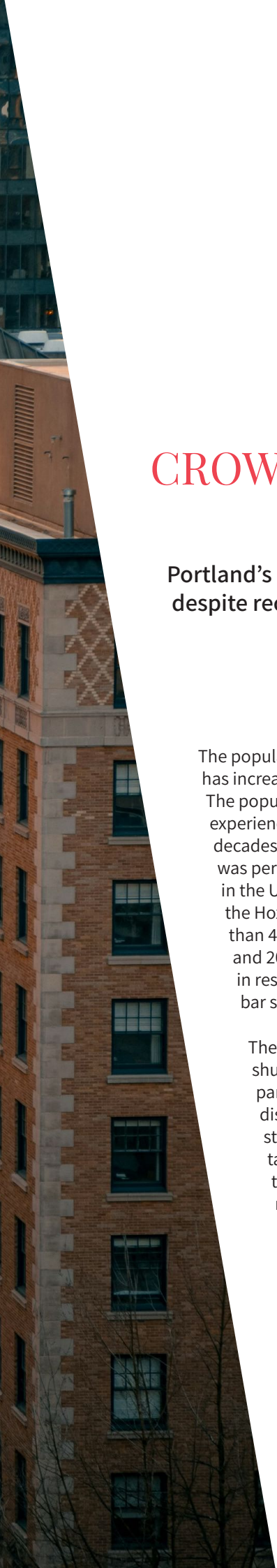
Photo Lance Gerber. Courtesy Desert X

Portland

PORTLAND

ANTOINETTE
HALL
GARY
BARTY
A
HALL
HALL

TUESDAY
UN. MAY INTO RESHITS
ON DEWITT
MAY 11, 2011 7:30PM



CROWD HUSTLE

Portland's sprawling, diverse art scene has expanded and remained interconnected, despite recent social unrest and swings in the city's population.

The population of the wider Portland metropolitan area has increased at a consistent pace every year since 1950. The population of downtown Portland, however, has experienced large swings up and down, especially in recent decades. In the decade before COVID, Portland's city centre was perceived by many industries as the hottest prospect in the United States. Numerous trendy hotel chains like the Hoxton opened outposts downtown, adding more than 4,000 new hotel beds to the area between 2010 and 2020. There was a corresponding increase in restaurant tables, spa appointments, bar stools and rideshare operators.

Then COVID hit. Along with the effects of societal shutdown, Portland made headlines during the pandemic as a locus for social unrest around economic disparity and racial injustice. News footage of boarded storefronts, fires, apparent riots and widespread tagging gave the impression the city was an exploding tinderbox. Few people were booking those new hotel rooms or partaking in any of the adjacent goods and services. Between 2020 and 2025, downtown Portland lost around 17,000 permanent residents. A corresponding drop in real estate value has been observed. Simultaneously, there has been an increase in homelessness. Meanwhile, Portland experimented with drug decriminalisation. That went so poorly that even advocates of the idea have acknowledged its disturbing ramifications.

There is, however, a bright spot in this darkness. Portland's art field appears as strong, vibrant

and unified as ever. One theory floated by some who work in the field is that the people who have left the city centre were never the people who the arts community relied upon anyway. However, most stakeholders believe the driving force behind the scene's cohesion is an ingrained sense of collaboration. At every level, it is clear Portland's art community is in it together.

City view

One direct way Portland's government supports the arts is through the city's \$35 art tax — a flat tax paid by all residents who make more than \$1,000 per year and whose household is above the federal poverty line. Chariti Montez is the Director of the Portland Office of Arts and Culture. Her office manages the art tax. "The way it was approved was to improve education and art experiences for students, explains Montez. We give out millions of dollars to arts organisations in operating support, unrestricted funds. Around 80 organisations receive that money. We partner

“Our leadership has been very committed to continuing to be a cultural destination, in spite of the lingering effects of pandemic business closures, commercial office vacancies, protests and our city's challenges with drugs and homelessness.

— *Sara Krajewski*

with three different arts nonprofits to distribute grants. We also support music, non-performance based works and celebrate Black arts in Portland.”

Montez notes that when the population of the city declines, that affects the amount of money collected for the art tax. “We definitely felt it was a little crunchy during the pandemic when everything was shut down and we started seeing people moving to the suburbs.” But when the downtown population was booming, that was also challenging for artists, Montez says. “When all those hotels and apartments were coming in, we saw dedicated art spaces going away. Artists were losing the spaces as they were getting redeveloped. So the physical space where people make and share their art was being lost.”

Another way the city government strives to assist the artist community is through support of events that bring art audiences back downtown. For example, Montez says, all those folks who moved out to the suburbs seem to still come downtown for certain specific events, such as the PDX Jazz Festival and the Portland Winter Lights Festival. Those events are in February and March, the coldest, wettest time of year in Portland, yet around 200,000 people show up for them. By supporting those large events, Montez’s office plays a role in transforming

Portland close to the ground

Amy Adams, founder of Portland’s Adams and Ollman gallery, keeps a list of what she calls “close to the ground projects here in PDX.” These are the art and culture spots you will probably not hear about or read about in the media, where the future of art and culture is being formed.

The Piano Farm

There is no piano. No farm. The Piano Farm is the Insta handle of Anis Mojgani, Oregon’s 10th Poet Laureate, the author and artist who hosts Poems at Sunset Out a Window. The event is just what it sounds like — a guy reading poems out his window to whomever shows up. Mojgani advertises the events on social media, inviting people to “bring your own chair or anything else you may want to sit on, rest upon, stretch out across, and as always, your own self, whatever shape of yearning, anger, sorrow, joy, it may be bent into by these days we are in.”

Hi Books

A tiny storefront in the corner of a historic mid-rise downtown, Hi Books is a bookstore/gallery. Women and AAPI owned, artist run, owner operated, and “born of a partnership between an illustrator and a photographer, collectively buried under the weight of their own collections,” the store offers rare art prints and editions, out of print books, photobooks and magazines and ephemera related to “art, fashion, design, youth culture, rave culture, queer history and counterculture, with an emphasis on independent publishers, small presses, and publications by, for, and about women, LGBTQIA+, and BIPOC artists and creators.”

Boathouse microcinema

Nestled on the eastern banks of the Willamette River, Boathouse Microcinema screens the work of local filmmakers in a converted fire boat station. Established in 2017 as a 10-week project, the screenings attracted such a large following that the founders continued the screenings until 2020 when COVID shut them down. In early 2025 the founders revived the microcinema, now screenings are back.

PPSTMM

A micro gallery run by artists in East Portland, PPSTMM (pronounced “pastime”) shows the work of local artists of all kinds in a friendly and cozy environment. Their social media post for their inaugural exhibition sums up the vibe: “a place of meeting, making, storing, thinking, escaping... Come human with others in this place and witness how that changes the contents of the room. Partake in action orientated correlations of body and mind, intellect and instinct; fusing aesthetic captivation with catalysation. Party Poetry, if you will.



Portland Art Museum
Photo Wesley Mc Lachlan



Jupiter and Semele (2023), Noah Alexander Isaac Stein

© Noah Alexander Isaac Stein

NA
Stein

perceptions of downtown. She says the Winter Lights Festival, in particular, has the potential to act as a transformative event because so many of the artists take over vacant retail spaces with their installations. It reminds everyone of the potential downtown has to be a cultural playground.

its collaborations with local Portland artists. “For several large exhibitions, we have sought out community partnerships to amplify the content, bringing a localised perspective to it, says Krajewski. Our goals now include bringing more community-centred lenses to collection presentation and

district, so we are not surrounded by nighttime businesses, which is when most of our activities take place.” Roqueñi says PICA has seen an uptick in drug addiction and the unhoused community outside their building. “I do not have data in terms of whether it has caused us to lose audiences, but it has

“Artists were losing the spaces as they were getting redeveloped. So the physical space where people make and share their art was being lost. — *Chariti Montez*

Institutional partners

The Portland Art Museum (PAM) is located in the heart of downtown. Shortly after COVID hit, PAM embarked on a major renovation. They stayed open throughout the pandemic, but with a smaller footprint. “That was important,” says Sara Krajewski, PAM’s Eichholz Senior Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. “Our leadership has been very committed to continuing to be a cultural destination, in spite of the lingering effects of pandemic business closures, commercial office vacancies, protests and our city’s challenges with drugs and homelessness.”

Krajewski says PAM undertook several concrete responses to COVID in an effort to sustain the community. They funded emergency grants for artists in the city. The museum also expanded its security efforts on site and around the neighbourhood. Says Krajewski, “That was met with gratitude from folks living nearby. Now that we are nearing completion of our new pavilion and main entrance, many folks are sharing a sense of optimism and pride in the beautiful park blocks where PAM sits. It is really a bright spot in an environment that actually has been turning around, not discounting the complications and challenges of course.” PAM has also strengthened

collection development.” PAM also collaborates with Portland artists through the endowed Northwest Art curatorial department and through exhibitions and acquisitions centred on local artists in the Photography, Graphic Arts, Native American Art and Contemporary departments.

The Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA) also heavily supports local visual art, time-based media and performances. “Interacting with the local community is part of our work on many levels,” tells Reuben Roqueñi, PICA’s Executive Director. We support and work with our peer organisations. We attend their events. They attend our events. There is an intersection there. We also work with some of the same artists. An artist who performs in our building may also have an exhibition in one of the galleries downtown. It is part of our curatorial work to be present in the work with our peers.”

Referring to Portland’s reported “dreaded urban death spiral,” Roqueñi says, “In part it is true in the way it has impacted the arts community. People are afraid to go downtown. The response from the city in trying to bolster the downtown corridors through arts and culture speaks well. But in terms of our work at PICA, we are not downtown. We are at the very edge of the warehouse

increased our concern for public safety. I am not here to counter a narrative of the struggles the city is having, because they are true. Though they can be blown up in the media and twisted in a way that is not helpful.”

Roqueñi says the arts community is the perfect place to spotlight more positive stories about Portland. “The arts ecology in Portland is tightly knit, has a lot of intersection between disciplines and is interdependent. It is the rising tide that elevates all boats. Portland is a haven for people seeking freedom of expression. There is a creative community here that is in these times coming together to work together more, holding on to each other, embracing, moving forward.”

Gallery parties

Portland’s art galleries are distributed in a few different areas. The more Blue Chip spaces tend to be downtown. Artist-run spaces and collectives tend to locate east of the Willamette River. Downtown hosts a First Thursday gallery walk every month. East of the river there is a First Friday event. Adams and Ollman gallery is downtown. They represent an international roster of artists, including some from the Pacific Northwest region and participate in major fairs, including Frieze London, Paris

Internationale and Art Basel Miami Beach. According to Amy Adams, the gallery's founder, not all that much has changed in the Portland art scene since COVID.

The Pacific Northwest has always been a place where people come and do things on their own terms, explains Adams. Even during this major outside event, COVID, this turning point for so many things in the world, I do not know if people here stopped doing things on their own terms. Aside from not being together, art was still being made, books were still being written and people were innovating. There was a poet here who was reading poems out of his window and people were bringing their chairs and listening. People were finding a way to do the thing that they needed to do regardless. I think we have an incredibly rich group of people here who do not necessarily pay attention to the outside world."

Adams and Ollman remained open throughout the pandemic, continuing to host openings and do business. Adams also remained an active participant in the scene as an audience member. She has a list she keeps of all the experimental things she hears Portland artists are doing. That kind of community involvement is essential to how she runs her own business. "Just personally, it influences the way I think about my work, to remember to be nimble and responsive and fun in as much as I can, tells Adams. It is a constant reminder of why we are all in this world. We need to support ideas and innovation, which come from the world of the arts. It makes me feel like the world is okay."

Rachel Falkowski, co-owner of Witching Hour Tattoo and Gallery, agrees with Adams that Portland is, in some ways, immune to the winds of history because of the independent spirit of its people. "I think Portland will always be a safe harbour for people who do things in a new, different, exciting way, believes Falkowski. This is a town of innovators. If a pandemic did not change that, nothing will." Witching Hour did, nonetheless, suffer financially during the pandemic since it was forced to close for a long period. "Tattoo artists absolutely cannot work from home, so we were all essentially unemployed until policy allowed the shops to reopen. It was a dark and scary time. But, during the shutdown era, people finally had the time to think about what their dream tattoo would be, to search for their ideal artist and to save up the money to jump on that project as soon as the door opened again. The months immediately after we went back to work were the busiest I have ever been!"

Noah Alexander Isaac Stein is a Portland artist whose work is represented by Black Fish, a contemporary art gallery downtown, a few blocks from Adams and Ollman. Stein is also President of First Friday PDX, the monthly art walk east of the river. "First Friday is in the former industrial area of Portland, in these old buildings that were factories, explains Stein. Spaces have been converted to galleries and art collectives. It is a dynamic place. The rents are lower so these spaces pop up overnight and sometimes also disappear overnight. It is a bubbling cauldron of art. You see some unusual things that you would not see in other parts of the city." Stein says foot traffic at both First Thursday and First Friday has remained strong throughout the pandemic and post-pandemic years. He has also witnessed continued collaboration between different parts of the city's art field.

He describes the feeling in Portland as a type of communal ambition, rather than individuals out for themselves — like crowd hustle. He also echoes what Adams and Falkowski said: that Portland is a place where artists do their own thing regardless of what is happening elsewhere. He says, "If you travel the well-worn paths of the art world, you often see the same artists or the same formats over and over again. No shade on that. There are great things happening and you can see that at major biennials and art fairs all over the world. But I am a firm believer that art and culture need to happen everywhere as a function of our critical thinking. The Pacific Northwest has a political history, a history of craftsmanship and self-reliance. You can find a different kind of thing, different ideas here. You just have to look in a different type of way."



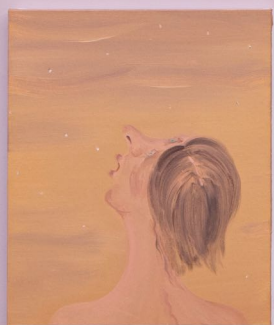
WITCHING HOUR

T
A
T
T
O
O

WITCHING HOUR TATTOO
FRI DEC 6TH
4-8PM
GRAND OPENING PARTY

1960 SE Hawthorne Blvd
Suite

Witching Hour Tattoo and Gallery
Courtesy Witching Hour Tattoo and Gallery



View from the "Jose Bonell. Ways of measuring twilight" exhibition

Courtesy Adams and Ollman



NO. 2

View from the "Scrambled again" exhibition

Photo Becca Schwartz



ARTISTS RUN VEGAS: SIN CITY'S *AVANT-GARDE* IS OFF-STRIP

Las Vegas is known for the spectacles on its Strip, but a visual art vanguard is flourishing in a growing number of alternative art spaces around the city.

Blue Chip art is easy to spot in Las Vegas — a massive Shepard Fairey mural on the outside of The Plaza; a site-specific Ivan Navarro infinity mirror in the Cosmopolitan's high roller poker room; a giant Frank Stella painting behind the registration desk of the Vdara Hotel and Spa. Yet, the city lacks the type of contemporary art ecosystem one would find in New York, LA, Paris, Hong Kong or hundreds of other modern cities. There is no “gallery sector”. The city's few white-walled commercial galleries are more like art stores for tourists, centred around Pop Art, street art or prints by masters. The city has one institutional, collecting art museum, The Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art on the campus of the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) — at least until the new Las Vegas Art Museum opens in 2028. And museum quality exhibitions are sometimes hosted in The Sahara West Library gallery, operated by the Clark County Library District.

But if you are a serious collector or art tourist visiting Vegas and you feel like you just need more of the good stuff — exciting, meaningful, experimental contemporary art that will expand your mind — you might have to go rogue and find one of the half dozen or so alternative art spaces around the city. Just finding these spaces can turn into its own adventure. Some are nomadic; some are in semi-apocalyptic strip malls; some are inside artist's homes or studios; many are open by appointment only; all are tucked away in the real Las Vegas, the parts of town most tourists never think about, where actual human beings live, away from the glitz of the strip.

Couper Russ gallery

Matt Couper and J. K. Russ moved to Las Vegas from Aotearoa in 2010. Russ is represented by PAULNACHE Gallery in New Zealand. Couper shows with the always buzzy La Luz de Jesus Gallery in Los Angeles. Both are accomplished, established artists who have exhibited extensively in galleries and institutions. They consider Vegas an ideal place to live and work, but they also consistently notice how few exhibition opportunities there are for local artists. In 2022, they opened Couper Russ Gallery inside their home, transforming the family room of a nondescript, two-level ranch with a pool into a pristine-looking white cube.

The curatorial focus of Couper Russ Gallery is strictly on Las Vegas based artists. Says Russ, “There are a lot of artists working away in their studios here. They are here and they are doing it, but they are not that visible, you know?” Couper agrees. “We started making a list of artists practicing in Vegas, and we knocked out like 150 really quickly.” Couper and Russ also routinely drop in on



Double negative (1969), Michael Heizer

© Michael Heizer





Scripted spaces (2024), Eri King

Courtesy Available Space Art Projects

Earth rise

In the desert an hour and a half drive northeast of Las Vegas lies *Double negative*, a gargantuan work of Land art by Michael Heizer. Created in 1969, it is basically a giant hole in the ground. Sympathisers call it a displacement that poetically derives its meaning from what is absent. Antagonists call it a joke or maybe a scar, noting the entitlement it must take for someone to obliterate a fragile desert landscape, then call it art. Heizer did not dig the trench himself. It was dug by Bryant Robison, a construction worker from nearby Moapa Valley and a few hired hands who helped with blasting and bulldozing. The whole operation, including purchase of the land, was financed by Virginia Dwan, founder of the influential Dwan Gallery. Since 1984, *Double negative* has been the property of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. MOCA's stewardship includes an agreement to allow the work to succumb to nature until, presumably, it is erased.

The last hitching post before adventurers embark across the final 13 km of deadly terrain to see *Double negative* in person is the town of Overton, Nevada. Recently, officials there dispatched a request for proposals asking artists to conceptualise a public sculpture that could serve as a gateway to the famous trench. The proposal said the sculpture should operate as an aesthetic response to Heizer's work. Artists do not often have the chance to file an official rebuttal to a famous artwork, so no surprise a lot of proposals were submitted. The artist who won the commission was Mark Brandvik, a Vegas native who attended a middle school named after the father of that contractor who dug Heizer's trench.

Brandvik titled his sculpture *Earth rise*. It resembles a rocket blasting into space, leaving behind a trail of boulders rather than a plume of fire. Brandvik wrote in his original proposal, "Amazing things exist in the Nevada desert, from majestic natural landforms to monumental Earthwork projects. In 1969, artist Michael Heizer developed one such project on the edge of a mesa outside of Moapa Valley that entailed the displacement of 240,000 tons of mostly sandstone and rhyolite rock. In that same year NASA astronauts, who had previously carried out training and geological studies in the Nevada desert, were preparing to launch to Earth's closest rock. This historical symmetry is reflected in the formal symmetry of *Earth rise* — the dynamite blast of rock doubles as a dynamic rocket exhaust plume, with both forms navigating and altering notions of space."

Brandvik ended his proposal with a nod to the relatively unknown worker Heizer hired to dig his trench, writing, "Much like the creation of *Double negative* over 50 years ago, *Earth rise* is to rely on the expertise of a local general contractor to assist with major elements of the project." As Brandvik installed *Earth rise* in 2023 at Overton's Moapa Valley Community Centre, he was surprised to see the then 91-year-old Bryant Robison walking up to have a look. "He was shocked that I knew who he was after he announced upon arrival, 'Hello, just wanted to see your sculpture. I built *Double negative*'", remembers Brandvik.

the MFA studios at UNLV. The fully-funded, three-year programme, which boasts several influential artists on its faculty, has turned out numerous successful studio artists in recent decades. When Couper and Russ work with an artist, they not only present the work professionally in their perfectly lit space. They also document the exhibition with high resolution images and create extensive writing about the works.

Most generously, Couper and Russ often hang the work in conversation with pieces by historically significant artists from their personal collection. "We can get a young artist from Las Vegas who is obsessed with drawing and put them next to a Philip Guston drawing, says Couper. That is a really big buzz for them and it also allows you to physically look at something that is from a very well known American artist alongside an artist just starting out that we think has potential."

Couper Russ Gallery has no "openings" *per se*. The driveway is only big enough for maybe two cars, so visits are strictly by appointment. That limitation has done nothing to soften the gallery's impact on the community. Artists and collectors who have visited the shows say they are particularly grateful for the "grey space" the gallery occupies. "If you go to a gallery on the strip, the impetus is on buying and selling the work. And if you go to a museum or institution, their impetus is on communicating something about society," says Russ. Couper agrees: "Here, it is a little more informal and relaxed. People might be connected to the art world already, but we also aim to be a welcoming space for people who perhaps

have not spent a lot of time in art galleries. They can bring their own experience to the work.”

Scrambled eggs

Like Couper Russ Gallery, Scrambled eggs prioritises the work of Las Vegas artists. Unlike Couper Russ, the space in which they show that work is always changing. Manny Muñoz founded Scrambled eggs in 2022. He had been looking at a lot of Vegas art on social media during COVID lockdown. Then, he says, “When things opened back up, I had this desire to go out and see all that art in person.” Muñoz realised that most of these Vegas artists had few places to show their work in public. An architecture student at the time, he had a little office space near downtown he had been renting as a studio. He decided to pivot and turn that space into a gallery.

“I was like, I think I can do this, says Muñoz. It is small enough to where if it fails, no one is going to know. I called up Brian Martinez, an artist I had been getting to know. He was a BFA student at UNLV. I felt like he has some of that academic education, so he might know what he is doing, so he can kind of help me figure it out. At the same time, he was super well connected outside the art scene. He grew up on the East Side of Vegas, which is primarily Hispanic. So that was something that was interesting to me, because it was also tackling the idea of black and brown artists, or underrepresented artists. It was kind of a big conversation at the time and I think it still is. But we do not really focus as much on that any more, because we are trying to look at artists more as a holistic part of the art scene and the community.”

That first show was well attended, so Muñoz and Martinez invited another artist to do a show a few weeks later. That went well, so they invited another. Over the summer they put on six shows in about four months. Then Muñoz had to let go

of the lease on the space because it was too expensive. After nearly a year of no shows, Muñoz reached out to the director of the Donna Beam student gallery at UNLV and asked if he was interested in collaborating on something. The director liked the idea of an outside curator coming in to do a show. “This was like almost a year since we had done our summer shows, so I hosted what we called Scrambled again, explains Muñoz. It was all the artists who had shown in our first six shows.” Muñoz raised a little bit of money for the show, which he spent on catering and a Mariachi band that performed outside the gallery under a tree. The show drew a huge crowd, which told Muñoz that he could have shows anywhere and the community he was building would show up.

Around this time, a little art book store called Hasta Siempre Books opened up downtown. Muñoz connected with Pedro Duran, the owner of the shop and found out there was a little back room included in the lease. He invited Pedro to curate an art exhibition in the space under the Scrambled eggs name. Pedro’s show was another success, which showed Muñoz that he could trust the curatorial part to others and just work behind the scenes. After a couple more Scrambled eggs exhibitions in the bookstore’s back room, Pedro moved to New York. Since then, Muñoz has been partnering with other spaces and curators, expanding his nomadic, community-centric model.

Meanwhile, he has been receiving mentorship from a Reno non-profit called The Holland Project and he started an interview series with his artists, which is hosted on Wendy Kveck’s popular contemporary art blog Couch in the Desert. He is also preparing for what will be the collective’s biggest exhibition, at the Sahara West Library, a sprawling, institutional gallery run by the Clark County Library District. As for the

future, Muñoz says he eventually wants to transform Scrambled eggs into a real “third space”. Ideally that would mean having a permanent space that hosts experimental art exhibitions, maybe has a printing press, a music venue and spaces for local vendors and workshops. “I am always looking at it from the point of view of how we can use this for something beneficial to the community,” Muñoz says.

Available Space Art Projects

Available Space Art Projects (ASAP) opened in 2020, during the height of COVID. It was founded as a project space dedicated to artistic freedom and experimentation, by Homero Hidalgo, an artist who moved to Vegas to earn his MFA. Hidalgo was born in Ecuador and previously lived in Miami and San Francisco. One of the first things he noticed about Vegas was that it was missing the type of art spaces he had seen in other cities, where artists could cut loose and challenge themselves. According to Hidalgo, “you go to San Francisco or Miami and there are pop-up project spaces everywhere. So I figured why not get that started here in Vegas? The mission was to encourage artists to do their B-Side projects. I wanted to shake the leaves of the town so people could see more unconventional art.”

Hidalgo partnered with artist Holly Lay and secured a lease on a commercial space in a rundown strip mall called Commercial Centre, off Sahara Boulevard. ASAP started getting proposals from artists right away. At first, they said yes to everyone and gave the artists full reign to do whatever they wanted. Hidalgo was amazed at the quality of the work. He was also impressed at how the Vegas community turned out big for the shows and for the artist lectures. Soon, the number of proposals they were receiving grew to where they far outnumbered available exhibition slots. Hidalgo also started receiving a lot of interest from artists outside of Vegas.



Cultivate harmony (2016), Shepard Fairey

ARR

ZOOM

After more than 30 exhibitions, Hidalgo started looking for a permanent space where ASAP could grow. He was also looking at the idea of buying a place that had some acreage so artists could branch out into land art projects. Then in December 2024, ASAP faced the most familiar of challenges that so many alternative art spaces encounter: gentrification. The wonderfully run-down strip mall the gallery occupied changed hands in a development deal, and they lost their lease. Since then, ASAP has been hosting exhibitions in the front space of artist Wendy Kveck's studio — the same Wendy Kveck who runs Couch in the Desert, which publishes the Scrambled eggs artist interviews. (Kveck is a professor at UNLV and one of the most prominent artists working in Vegas right now. She is one of a handful of people, like Matt Couper and J. K. Russ, whose name comes up repeatedly when interviewing people in the Vegas art scene.)

Hidalgo says he is still contemplating what a permanent space for ASAP looks like. He wonders what it looks like to continue supporting Vegas artists and encouraging them to level up, while also expanding his programme to include more artists beyond Vegas, including Blue Chip artists. The ultimate goal might be to evolve the project into something evermore rare in the contemporary art ecosystem: a white wall commercial gallery that participates in the market while still prioritising experimentation and artistic freedom. Regardless, he says the most important thing is to keep encouraging the artists who live and work in Vegas to think big. He says, "People here are supportive of the arts. When we sell work, it is to Vegas locals. They are genuinely moved by the pieces they are buying. The reason why is because what we do always has the artist in mind. That is why we focus on the art and the artist first."





View from the "The anonymous identified.
Ecclesiastical painters from the Bajío region" exhibition

Courtesy Couper Russ Gallery

FOOT



CREATIVE TRUST

Creative culture does not happen on its own. Seattle officials are taking steps to ensure the city's administrative fabric permanently accommodates the needs of its artists.

It was late May 2025. Art and culture power brokers from around the world were gathered in San Francisco for the first Creative Land Trust Summit. The event was based on the idea that there is a relationship between a city's art scene and its reputation as a global capital. In other words, great cities are great in part because their arts and culture scene is robust. Of course the greater a city becomes, the more expensive real estate becomes, but since most working artists are not paid well, over time fewer artists can afford to live and work there. As a city loses its artists, its arts and culture scene declines, making the city less great.

Among those speaking at the summit were representatives from London. They talked of how their city at one time had a reputation as a vibrant hub for up-and-coming music acts. But in recent decades, a number of live music clubs, recording spaces and practice studios had closed and local musicians were having to move out of town in order to afford to pursue their careers. The city still had plenty of massive performance venues that could attract superstar talent, but the music scene below that tier was becoming a shadow of its former self. Consequently, London is in danger of no longer being seen as a place where musicians have a good chance to scale up. The same phenomena, they said, is happening in theatre, film and visual arts.

In the audience listening to London's story was Gülgün Kayim, Director of Arts and Culture for the City of Seattle — a position Kayim had been in for less than a year, having previously served as the Director of the Office of Arts, Culture and the

Creative Economy for the City of Minneapolis. Kayim also happened to be a native Londoner, earning her BA in Theater and Film from University of Middlesex. Before becoming involved in cultural governance, she was an accomplished artist in the theatre. Her life experiences had already taught her that the challenges London is facing are real. She was there to hear about solutions.

The primary fix being offered at the summit is something called a Creative Land Trust. Basically, a non-profit entity takes control of real estate assets in a city, then manages them in such a way that artists can afford to live and work in them for a long period of time, regardless of how expensive the surrounding real estate becomes or how much the area gentrifies. The Kenneth Rainin Foundation, one of the key sponsors of the summit, pioneered this idea in 2013 in San Francisco. They have data showing that it has had a transformational effect on that city. Recently London has been trying it out. It is also being tested in Sydney.

Kayim agrees that real estate prices can affect a city's art scene. She also understands that affordable live and work space for artists is only one piece in a large and complex cultural puzzle. The whole picture involves elements of every other professional field within a community, including the non profit sector, food, beverage and hospitality sectors, transportation, parks and recreation, policing, insurance, commercial development and every level of government. What a city needs if it wants to become or remain great, Kayim believes, is a comprehensive plan for integrating art into the full fabric of the community. "I call it art based community development," she says.

Here is an example of how it works. Kayim and her team recently initiated a project involving Seattle's jazz community. For background, back in 2021, in response to COVID-19, Seattle launched something called Hope corps, which pays local artists to do creative work that contributes "to the well-being" of the city. The programme funds all kinds of things, from performances to education to public art. One Seattle neighbourhood that was hard hit by the pandemic was Pioneer Square. It has cobblestone streets, and is where most of the art galleries are, as well as a lot of bookstores, cafes and restaurants. It is also the historical centre of Seattle's famous jazz scene. COVID annihilated that scene. Most of the musicians and live music clubs that had made the neighbourhood what it was were barely hanging on. Using Hope corps money, Kayim and her team funded an idea a jazz musician came up with to put on a night of live jazz in clubs all over Pioneer Square. The funds paid all of the

musicians, so the clubs had no expenses and the public could attend for free. Massive crowds showed up. The streets were packed. Food trucks came out. All the bars were full. That was a Tuesday in the middle of winter, and it was the best night the neighbourhood businesses had seen in years.

"That is what art based community development looks like, says Kayim. Ask yourself, when you go to big cities, what is it about that place that is attractive? It is hard to put your finger on, but I think it is

that burst of energy. My role is to mobilise art to make the city vibrant; to leverage art and culture as an asset for telling the story of place; and to make sure artists get paid for their time." Kayim acknowledges that a lot of this is what she calls "internal ball playing", meaning it is not exciting. There are issues that have to be dealt with around land, zoning and development. She says: "It is the invisible hand of government. The purpose is to create the conditions to have an environment where things will happen. For example, it is the

What is the One Seattle Graffiti Plan?

Like many cities, Seattle saw a massive spike in illegal street art during COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2023 and 2024, the city received around 50,000 requests for graffiti mitigation service. Facing limited resources, the Mayor's office instituted an experimental programme called the One Seattle Graffiti Plan. It paid artists, including young artists who are connected to the street art scene, to replace illegal, unwanted aesthetic expressions with sanctioned artworks.

Gülgün Kayim, Director of Arts and Culture for the City of Seattle, says the programme is very positive and is working. But, she says, "I dislike the word graffiti. I come from the land of Banksy. Graffiti is an accepted art form. It is also an American vernacular art form. What we are talking about as a problem in Seattle is tagging, the destructive marking that happens on buildings and on artworks as well." Kayim says that the solution to destructive tagging has to be collaborative, which is why the One Seattle plan is effective. "The mayor's initiative works across departments. They also partner with outside organisations to create street art. We have a dedicated person who works in our office to collaborate on interdepartmental work. We are working upstream. We go to schools to work with youth to educate them about how to make graffiti art. We explain that tagging is harmful. It is done without permission. Graffiti is fine, you just have to get authorised use in order to celebrate this art form. I think it is a positive proactive programme that has had a lot of impact."

Millions of dollars have been spent through the programme to create murals all over downtown. In addition to covering existing tags, blank walls are being covered in new murals. The thinking is that a bare wall invites curiosity, whereas a great artwork gives people something to care about — someone will look after it and make sure it is not tagged. "It tells stories, and those are mechanisms for pride and community. It says the place is worth it."



Gülgün Kayım

ARR



Paragon (2003), Don Fels
ARR





Damages on Paragon (2003) by Don Fels

ARR

permitting environment that allows street musicians to exist. Whether a glass blowing studio can exist in one part of town is all about zoning. It is the affordability of space that allows artists to live and work in town — then you can have open studios. It is all the mechanisms of government that make it so this can happen.”

One of the most visible ways any city engages with the visual arts community is through public art. Seattle was one of the first cities in the United States to embark on a large-scale, official public art programme. Funds to manage the collection come from a percentage of capital budgets, including from utilities, the department of transportation and the construction of new roads and buildings. The city’s collection currently stands at around 4,000 pieces. Kayim’s office is responsible for managing it. She says: “The Jonathan Borofsky statue in front of the Seattle Art Museum, the giant hammering man, that is ours. We also have a portable collection. For that, our curators buy artwork from local artists that we hang in city offices everywhere. That collection is around 3,000 objects. Walking into city hall you will see the artwork. That is another way we focus locally.”

Kayim’s office is currently managing the public art element of one of the biggest public works projects in the United States, Seattle’s new Waterfront Park. Designed by the same company that designed The High Line in New York, this massive project involved the deconstruction of part of a highway and the construction of a new walkway connecting the waterfront with Seattle’s famous Pike Place Market. The public artwork component is significant. Of course,

public art investments are tricky, in part because art is subjective. That issue aside, Kayim says the most complex part of her office’s work is communicating to everyone involved how layered and nuanced the whole process is. It is not just a question of commissioning an artist to make something cool looking that can be installed along a walkway. Most of what Kayim’s team deals with has nothing at all to do with the aesthetic value or meaning of the art.

She explains: “Public art has become very institutionalised. The money is flowing through specific channels. We have to consider legal issues and liabilities. Also, our collection is aging. We are thinking about legacy, as in how we are going to deal with this collection in the future. Our maintenance budget has not grown along with our collection, which means our restricted dollars do not allow us to keep feeding money into maintenance. That is an issue for the entire field of public art to consider. Some people are thinking the concept of temporary public art is something to take on. Temporary meaning 20 or 30 years. Permanence is lifetime, generational. Where are the resources going to come from to make that so?”

That issue of permanence has been front and centre in Seattle recently. As soon as Kayim arrived in her new position a year ago, she was pulled into an ongoing negotiation between the city and Seattle-based artist Don Fels about a public sculpture he had created decades before, called *Paragon*. The negotiation had become bitter and Fels had made multiple pronouncements in the press decrying the city. His conclusion:

“I think public art has made a wrong turn, leaving behind the community-based impetus of public art that those of us who got it started in Seattle decades ago so believed in.”

The sculpture in question is an elevated boat made of wood and metal. It was installed in Seattle’s Village Park and Shoreline Habitat in the early 2000s. It was built with reclaimed wood that was not designed to withstand decades of wind, water, sun or pests. Over time, ants and the weather caused the wood to decay to a point where the large, heavy object posed a serious risk to anyone standing beneath it. The initial contract between Fels and the commissioning entity did not include a contractual obligation to maintain the work. Neither did Fels endeavour to maintain it over the years. Once the damage was identified, the city’s public art maintenance budget was not sufficient to repair or rebuild *Paragon*. The decision was made to deaccession the work from the city’s collection.

Kayim explains, “*Paragon* was a collaborative effort with the port. They own the land. We did not commission the work. Our programme was new at the time, but we were asked to look after the work after it was made. The piece was built with methods that at the time were fine, but now would be problematic. We have a limited budget to do specialised care. We have on staff a specialist who goes piece to piece, but we have 4,000 pieces. So in the scope of what we have, we need to ration our efforts. We did not neglect the work. We dealt with the work in the order we always do. But it had inherent flaws. We do not take it lightly.”

FOCUS

Kayim further notes that Fels perhaps misunderstands the intent behind the deaccessioning process. The city is only deaccessioning the work in order to administratively remove it from the books. If Fels rebuilds it, the city intends to reacquire it. There is already a new space reserved for it when and if the new work is complete. Says Kayim, “We have to follow a process where the source of the money dictates where we can put the art. So if there is a big construction on the waterfront, we can put the art on the waterfront. There is no construction where Paragon is, so we cannot put it there.”

The city has already lost two court cases in the past over other artworks that affirm the limitations Kayim is working under. Fels, meanwhile, recently acknowledged, “I like Gülgün and do not envy her position.” The reality is that public artists do not usually have to deal with the same administrative details as people who work in public art governance. The artists perceive bureaucrats as anti-art, when in many cases they are simply facing limited resources — or, as in the case of *Paragon*, they are trying their best under difficult conditions to mitigate challenges caused by the poor planning of others.

Such is the humdrum reality that unfolds behind the scenes of that buzz Kayim talks about — the buzz that makes a city feel exciting and turns it into a culturally significant place. Cities can buy up spaces and rent them on the cheap to artists; they can fund symphonies and festivals and museums; they can pay publicists to convince tourists to visit. But what ultimately makes a city great is the work people like Kayim and her team do behind the scenes to create the conditions in which artists can do their work. Support has to flow freely between all the stakeholders. That is the definition of creative trust.





Brady Black

Courtesy Downtown Seattle Association

PORTRAIT



Untitled (Citizen seeds, 2021), Kim Abeles

Courtesy Kim Abeles

WE WEAR THIS CITY

Since moving there in 1979, Kim Abeles has become a quintessential Los Angeles artist, expressing not so much the image of the city, but its spirit and potential.

Los Angeles has a lot of different reputations. Some know it as a place where dreams can come true, home of Hollywood and Beverly Hills, where everyone has a chance to be a star. Others know it as home to Skid row, the most notorious centre of poverty and homelessness in the United States. It is a surfer's paradise with 120 kilometres of pristine beaches and also a wildfire waiting to happen atop one of the world's most active fault lines. Of course the sun shines in LA seventy-five percent of the time. Yet, the city also has one of America's most persistent smog problems.

Numerous artists have made their careers concocting artworks that represent the complexities of this hard to define place. Mary Corse captures the perceptual phenomena of its shifting light; Young-Il Ahn expressed the colours reflected on the surface of its sea; Mark Bradford mines and maps its layered social and political structures. Other artists take inspiration from LA's glitz, its many cultures, its promise, its architecture, its signs, its natural environment and its many failures. None, however, has come closer to capturing the spirit of Los Angeles in their work than Kim Abeles. The word "spirit" comes from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning breath. Abeles's longest running body of work, her *Smog collectors*, literally uses the breath of Los Angeles as its medium.

Smog collectors

Abeles was born in 1952 in the suburbs of St Louis, then moved with her family to Pittsburgh. She earned her BFA from Ohio University then moved to Los Angeles in 1978 to earn her MFA from

University of California, Irvine. At that time, she recalls, studio space for artists downtown was still affordable, "about ten cents a square foot." She scored a large studio in the Victor Clothing Building, a historic mid-rise near Skid Row. "I lived there illegally, she says with a smile. Most people used their studios as day spaces, but I had a bed the size of my body." The vibe of downtown LA back then reminded Abeles of growing up back in Pittsburgh. "I loved it. That kind of gritty place. I guess it is like a Dickens thing, you know? I loved the people that were walking the streets, and trying to sell on the streets, and the hawkers trying to get you to come into their stores, and the overly loud music. I still love that, because I know that there is a life behind it."

During breaks from her studio work, Abeles got in the habit of going out on the building's fire escape, where she would stare off in the direction of the San Gabriel Mountains. She says, "I observed the mountains once on a clear day. That was in 1985. Then it took another



Dinner for two in one month of smog (2011), Kim Abeles

Courtesy Kim Abeles



year and two months to see them clearly again.” Abeles learned that smog, a form of pollution caused by fossil fuel pollution, was the culprit clouding her view. She had a realisation then that the smog always looked to her like it was far away, like it was always over there, at a distance — it never felt like it was right in front of her. But it had to be, she thought. It was everywhere.

She wondered how, as an artist to explain to an audience what she was experiencing — that effort to see something that was right in front of her, but which did not look like it was there at all. She had the idea to use the smog itself to make an image of what it was concealing. She made a stencil in the shape of the San Gabriel Mountains and attached the stencil to a panel of glass. She set the glass outside on the fire escape and allowed the smog, which is essentially an oil product, to collect on the glass for more than a month. The smog adhered to the surface, leaving behind an image of the mountains rendered in a grey film.

Abeles finished that first *Smog collector* in 1987. She enclosed it in a glass frame and sold it to a collector named Madeleine Grynsztejn, who was then in her 20s. Abeles figured the image would probably not last very long since it was made from such a fragile, experimental medium. “If we opened the glass frame, we could just wipe that thing away,” she says. But in 2023, when she reached out to Grynsztejn, who is now Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and inquired about borrowing the work for a survey of her *Smog collectors* at California State University in Fullerton, Abeles learned that it was still in perfect condition. Says Abeles, “I was so

grateful and thankful that they still had it and that it looked like the day I made it. Sometimes when collectors buy your work you do not really know what happens to it.”

In the 38 years since making that first one, Abeles has made *Smog collectors* on a range of different surfaces including fabric, porcelain

and clocks. She has used smog to create images of car parts and factory buildings. She made *Smog collectors* depicting food on plates arranged on a table, calling it *Dinner for two in one month of smog* (2011). One of her largest *Smog collectors* is a large-scale panorama titled *Sixty blocks square of Los Angeles horizon*

Museum hopping with Kim Abeles

Since moving to Los Angeles in 1978, Kim Abeles has seen almost everything about its art scene change. The biggest recent evolution is the rise of alternative exhibition spaces run by artists. She says, “I cannot even keep up with the alternative spaces that have opened. I think it adds energy, creative energy and gives people what they need. Artists need support systems.” There are, however, some things about LA that have not changed — namely what Abeles calls the city’s “stalwart institutions”. Her favourites are four spots huddled around Exposition Park downtown. Not only are they nestled close together near an accessible metro stop, and mostly free, but she says they go beyond hosting exhibitions to foster a sense of community for Angelenos.

California African American Museum (CAAM)

Founded in 1977 and formally opened in 1981, CAAM moved to its permanent location in Exposition Park, south of Downtown, in 1984. The 44,000-square-foot campus was designed by African American architects Jack Haywood and Vince Proby. Overseen by the California Natural Resources Agency, CAAM was the first African American museum fully supported by a state. Its collection includes more than 6,000 objects in addition to a reference library that includes more than 20,000 books.

California Science Centre

Consistently one of the ten most visited museums in the United States, California Science Centre is home to multiple aircraft and spacecraft, including the Mercury-Redstone 2, which carried the first great ape into space. It also houses an IMAX theatre.

Natural History Museum

Opened in 1913, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County claims to maintain a collection of around 35 million objects spanning 4.5 billion years of history. It includes permanent exhibitions covering the age of mammals, the age of dinosaurs and the origins of Los Angeles. The campus also includes a theatre, cafe and restaurants.

USC galleries

The University of Southern California, located right across the street from Exposition Park, is home to the Fisher Museum of art, which houses a substantial contemporary art collection, as well as the student galleries for the USC Roski School of Art and Design.



Kim Abeles
Photo Joyce Kim



Smog catcher II (Thirty days of smog, 1992), Kim Abeles
Courtesy Kim Abeles

“I wondered, what is the art for? People already come here. They do not need this. So my thought was, why not try to encourage someone to go further. You know, like a life goal. The journey does not just stop at your comfort distance. Go further.

— *Kim Abeles*

(*Seven days of smog*). Her most illustrious examples, perhaps, are her portraits of world leaders in smog. The *Presidential commemorative smog plates* portray eight American presidents, along with comments they made about industry or the environment. They were left out in the smog for different lengths of time depending on each President’s environmental record. Ronald Reagan’s is the darkest. That of his predecessor, Jimmy Carter, is one of the most faint. (Abeles continued that concept in 2019 with a series titled *World leaders in smog*, which portrays the portraits of leaders who gave speeches at climate summits between the years of 2011 and 2018, along with quotes from their speeches.)

Citizen seeds

Reflecting on her use of Los Angeles smog as a medium, Abeles says, “We wear the city. You know, you wear it. You are not just in it, it is part of who you are.” That idea is integral to another project Abeles recently completed, called *Citizen seeds*. It consists of six large-scale sculptures installed along the Park to Playa regional trail, a 21-kilometre urban nature trail stretching from the View Park-Windsor Hills neighbourhood to Playa Del Rey Beach near Los Angeles Airport. Each sculpture represents a seed that is native to the site where it is placed.

What initially concerned Abeles about the project is that the works were planned for a public nature

space that was already widely used. She says, “I wondered, what is the art for? People already come here. They do not need this. So my thought was, why not try to encourage someone to go further. You know, like a life goal. The journey does not just stop at your comfort distance. Go further.” To achieve this, she embedded markers in the surfaces of the seeds conveying information about the locale and the environment, along with indications of where they are in relation to the other seeds.

In one sense, she acknowledges that the idea of something that says “you are here” is obvious, something that is on every public marker. She says: “Well, of course, I am here. But I guess I am always wanting to emphasise to you that you are here, on Earth, on this trail, in this spot. I think we just forget that so often. We are ready to think about where we have been or where we are going to go. So there are things on the seeds that are about the journey, as well as the specifics of the geography of this place. Like, here is a freeway. Here is an outline of downtown Los Angeles. And you are right here, and here are the other ones.” There is little chance that anyone would be able to walk the entire length of the trail in one day, so they would have to make a point to come back again and again to see them all. “So they each give you a clue. They each give you encouragement,” Abeles says.

Each of the seeds weighs about 10 tonnes, and Abeles does not use fabricators. She learned new

metalwork techniques and how to work with terrazzo in order to make these sculptures. And her involvement did not end with their installation. She negotiated an agreement with the city so that she could be the one who does maintenance on the seeds. “I was going up there anyway,” Abeles jokes. “Public art is also different. At least the way I engage with it. I like to interact with people who are seeing it. When I go up there and do maintenance and somebody asks, why are you painting that, I love saying I made this. And they say no way, no you did not. And I say look, there is my signature. Here is my ID. They are not going to give me an award or anything. I just want them to know there is a person behind it.”

That impulse to let people know a human being made these seeds is not about ego, Abeles says. “I do not want to do work about myself. I am okay to hide behind the subjects.” She is not the subject of the work, she says. Neither are whatever plants the seeds represent. The viewers are the subject. She says it reminds her of a phrase used widely in immigration protests, attributed to Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulos: “They tried to bury us, they did not know we were seeds.” She adds “It is about perception. I am telling you that we can achieve something.” Again, Abeles is using the stuff that makes up Los Angeles as the medium in her work. Like the *Smog collectors* are made from the city’s breath, the seeds contain its potential.





WOULD BE NICE TO
READ THE MAGAZINE
ON THE IPAD...

There is another app. for that!

