

Review

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Entertainment & Arts

A modern Stonehenge rises in Desert Hot Springs: Here are the standouts in Desert X 2025



Jose Dávila, "The act of being together," 2025, marble (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)

By Christopher Knight

Art Critic

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- The fifth installment of the Desert X biennial is the smallest yet, with just 11 sculptures on view around the Coachella Valley.
- A mammoth ‘desert Stonehenge’ by Guadalajara-based Jose Dávila steals the show.
- A service station for the soul by L.A.’s Alison Saar and a 1,300-foot mirrored “zip-line” by Swiss artist Raphael Hefti offer distinctive pleasures.

Desert X, the [biennial exhibition](#) of site-related installation art commissioned for varied locations in and around Palm Springs, continues to shrink.

From 16 artists for the inaugural in 2017, and the same number (plus three collectives) two years later, subsequent iterations have gotten steadily smaller. Just 11 artists are participating in the latest version, with only nine works ready at its March 8 opening. (The remaining two were expected to be completed soon.) Smaller isn’t necessarily lesser, of course, although few of these projects are compelling. The somewhat more compact map of Coachella Valley sites being used this time is one benefit: No [driving 198 miles](#) to and from the vicinity of the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway and the edge of the Salton Sea, as was necessary in 2019.

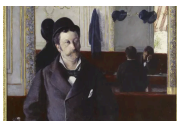
Still, Desert X 2025 does feel thin. Only three installations stand out — one at the foot of a hiking trail in a Palm Desert park, the other two in dusty landscapes in Desert Hot Springs.



Jose Dávila, "The act of being together," 2025, marble (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)

The knockout is “The act of being together,” a monumental construction of stacked blocks of marble by Jose Dávila, 51, who is based in Guadalajara, Mexico. Twelve massive chunks of white stone were quarried there, transported in their raw state across the border and piled in six pairs adjacent to a Desert Hot Springs wind farm. The shrewd, vivifying juxtaposition pits crude, primal, static stone, its huge weight pressing the ground beneath your feet, against sleek, industrially elegant windmills spinning overhead to catch the invisible airstream and generate similarly imperceptible energy.

Five chunky pairs are arrayed around a central stack. Inevitable are thoughts of ancient Stonehenge, or perhaps primordial cairns marking trails or burial grounds in premodern societies. You are at a ceremonial site, but here the ritual is distinctive and contemporary: The pomp and circumstance in biennial art exhibitions like Desert X beckon the faithful to assemble from far and wide. Borders get crossed, materially and conceptually. Dávila’s sculpture is conscious of its role as an engine for “the act of being together.”



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What's beautifully articulated is the precariousness of that event. Dávila has stacked the stones carefully, with no sense of physical danger in the way one massive rock is placed atop the other. Yet, these compositions are not neat and clean. Upper blocks project out several feet from their base, sit on the edge or stand tall and lean.

These sculptural elements build on the history of simplified geometric forms in [Richard Serra](#)'s exceptional minimalist "[prop](#)" works, where massive plates of lead and steel lean against each other, providing contrarian weight to stand up and defy gravity's relentless pull. But, unlike the industrial materials that Serra leaned and stacked, this sculpture's classical legacy of marble is Dávila's chosen reference. Art's past is juxtaposed with the desert's advanced industrial turbines.

Dávila's huge sculptural ensemble appears permanent, which would be great, although its elements may be dispersed when Desert X closes on May 11, as these projects typically are. (According to a spokesperson, the sculpture's ultimate fate is under discussion.) About five minutes away, a poetic gas station by Los Angeles artist [Alison Saar](#) awaits your car's arrival.



Alison Saar, "Soul Service Station," 2025, mixed media (Lance Gerber / Desert X)

“Soul Service Station” derives from an earlier, considerably [different work](#) the artist made 40 years ago in Roswell, N.M., when she was not yet 30. Signs assembled from vehicle tires line a dusty pedestrian route from the paved road to her gas station — a cleverly suggestive Shell station, apparently, given the chrome conches adorning the pump handles. (Ten million years ago, the Coachella Valley was at the bottom of a sea.) The signs’ messages are winking bits of inspirational doggerel by poet Harryette Mullen (“When your heart has fallen flat, we pump it up.”)

At the end of the short trail, the fuel offered inside Saar’s compact service station, a shiny tin shack sheltered among trees, is spiritual nourishment. The sustenance is presided over by a sculpture of an Amazonian woman, who wields a squeegee rather than a lance. (“When you can’t see ahead, we wipe your windshield clean and clear.”) She, like the charming shack, is sheathed in sheets of old-fashioned ceiling tin, a staple of the artist’s work.

This signature material dates to 19th century America, when it emerged as a mass-produced, middle-class design element to compete with unique, aristocratic plaster ceilings. If accessible democratic architectural material can be identified, this is it.



Inside Alison Saar's "Soul Service Station," an Amazon wields a squeegee (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)



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A half-hour away in Palm Desert, Swiss artist Raphael Hefti, 46, has stretched an impossibly long strip of reinforced fire-hose material, jet black on one side and mirror-bright silver on the other. The aerial strip, swaying overhead in the breeze, is roughly 1,300 feet long — more than 3 ½ football fields. The band is anchored from a high rocky cliff at one end, near the start of a well-used hiking trail, and a tall steel support drilled into the flat desert at the other.

An engineering feat, for sure, the resulting catenary curve in the sagging line is a visual treat as well, buoyant and struggling against the pull of gravity for no other reason than to delight. Without the structural principles behind catenary curves, there would be no Gothic cathedrals or Renaissance domes — nor, for that matter, any lacy spiderwebs. Hefti's curve is shallow in the extreme, given the vast length, and suggests environmental, maybe even planetary scale. Twisting in space, the slender mirrored-line flashes in and out of sight, depending on the time of day, the angle of the sun and shifting weather conditions. At night in ambient light, it's barely visible, competing with a canopy of stars.



Raphael Hefti, "Five things you can't wear on TV," 2025, mixed media (Lance Gerber / Desert X)

In a rugged desert park, the linear sculpture feels at once bold and fragile, muscular and delicate. Hefti has titled the work "Five things you can't wear on TV," a sly reference to cautions against wearing pinstripes on camera, lest moiré patterns

interfere with a television monitor's crisp electronic imagery. The title positions the perceptually fluctuating work as existing outside routine contemporary aspirations; instead, it occupies a witty place in a vaguely absurd counterculture.

The exhibition, organized by Desert X artistic director Neville Wakefield and curator Kaitlin Garcia-Maestas, director at Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, N.Y., includes additional installations of relatively routine fare by Sanford Biggers, Agnes Denes, Cannupa Hanska Luger, Sarah Meyohas, Ronald Real and Muhannad Shono. Still to come: Kimsooja and Kipwani Kiwanga.

The postpandemic sluggishness in arts fundraising and audience numbers still being felt by many cultural institutions may explain this year's more modest ambitions. The once-exciting biennial program also shot itself in the foot in 2019, taking a multimillion-dollar donation from [Saudi Arabia](#). Desert X is still co-organizing installations there, in what is a blatant case of art-washing to polish the soiled international reputation of a murderous, absolute monarchy where free expression is forbidden. Three works in the Coachella Valley are as worthwhile as any Desert X has yet produced, but that's barely enough for a festival.

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Christopher Knight

Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight won the 2020 [Pulitzer Prize for criticism](#) and was a finalist for the prize in 1991, 2001 and 2007. In 2020, he also

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