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Desert X art biennial sets a March opening, minus Palm Springs' support

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Doug Aitken's "Mirage," a ranch house mirrored on the inside and out, was on view in the inaugural Desert X in 2017.

The Desert X art biennial, whose opening this month had been postponed because of the COVID-19 surge, announced Tuesday that it will go forward with its third Coachella Valley exhibition starting March 12.

The free biennial, which gained a following by staging large-scale, site-specific outdoor artworks across miles of California desert in 2017 and 2019, has been nothing if not contentious since the last Coachella Valley show. The organization accepted funding from the government of Saudi Arabia in early

2020 on “Desert X AlUla,” held in that country and featuring artists from the Middle East, Europe and the U.S. The partnership prompted several Desert X board members including artist Ed Ruscha to resign protesting the collaboration with a government responsible for human rights abuses and the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

The city of Palm Springs declined to sponsor the new Desert X because of the “Desert X AlUla” partnership. In January it authorized \$30,000 for Christopher Myers’ Desert X work “Altanviro and Loper,” a series of sculptural installations with steel horses along East Tahquitz Canyon Way. The work addresses “the truths that exist in the slippage between history and mythology,” according to the artist statement, as it tells a fictional story of two ranchers, one Mexican and one African American. The city later reversed its position, offering to fund the work only if it could work directly with the artist. Desert X declined.

“They made the motion and the vote without reaching out to Desert X,” said the biennial’s executive director, Jenny Gil. “After the meeting, we said: ‘We’re very thankful for the support, but this is a Desert X project. This is not how it works.’”

The hospitality marketing organization PS Resorts gave \$10,000 to support Myers’ work, and an individual donor contributed as well, Desert X representative Lyn Winter said. The cities of Palm Desert, Desert Hot Springs and Rancho Mirage are supporting this year’s Desert X biennial, along with other donors.

Desert X no longer has a partnership with the Saudi government’s Royal Commission of AlUla, Gil said. When pressed as to whether or not it is still in partnership with any other entity of the Saudi government, Desert X didn’t answer directly. Desert X President Susan Davis, instead, offered a statement via email: “The experience with the Royal Commission of AlUla was very positive and sparked important cultural dialogue. Desert X is currently considering several international opportunities,” she said.

Other events in the Coachella Valley have been canceled, including the Palm Springs International Film Festival, which was set to kick off this month, and the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival and Stagecoach Festival, normally held in April.

Desert X, however, might be easier to stage as a pandemic-era happening. Artworks are outdoors, spread across 40 miles. Visitors follow a map, at their own pace, traveling in their own vehicles.

This year the exhibition will run through May 16 and include “robust” digital engagement, including artist talks and performances as well as a “Desert X 2021” film exploring themes and ideas in the exhibition as well as footage of the artworks, so viewers can follow along at home.

Joshua Tree-based artist Kim Stringfellow and New York-based artist Xaviera Simmons will participate in Desert X 2021. The full artist lineup will be announced Feb. 16.