

The New York Times

Tyre Nichols's Photography Will Soar on Desert X Billboards

The outdoor art exhibition in California will feature six photographs that Nichols took in Memphis, where he was fatally beaten by police officers.

By Jori Finkel March 3, 2023



PALM SPRINGS, Calif. — Tyre Nichols, the 29-year-old Black man who died in January after a brutal beating by Memphis police officers, never had the chance to exhibit the photographs he took of his adopted hometown. But starting this weekend, a selection will appear on roadside billboards as part of the Desert X biennial — a highly adventurous and occasionally political art exhibition that can be viewed at outdoor sites across the Palm Springs area.

“We think about this as a way of celebrating Tyre’s imagination,” said Neville Wakefield, the Desert X artistic director who moved quickly to include Nichols alongside 11 more established artists. “He was an aspiring photographer, and in that sense we’re commemorating not just his life but the creative potential of all lives truncated or cut short by police violence.”

Ben Crump, the lead lawyer representing the Nichols family, called it the first major exhibition showcasing work by Nichols, whose longtime passions included photography and skateboarding. “We believe in the mission of Desert X and feel that now, more than ever, art giving voice to important social issues is crucial,” he said.

¹ A Desert X installation rendering of Tyre Nichols’s “Originals.” Credit...GoFundMe Tyre Nichols Memorial Fund

Nichols's billboard installation, called "Originals," will feature six photographs he took in Memphis, including a serene scene of the Hernando de Soto Bridge lit up at night; a warmly colored sunset panorama; and an edgier composition showing a monument to Tom Lee, a Black river worker who rescued dozens of people from the Mississippi River in 1925 after a steamboat capsized. All will be installed along North Gene Autry Trail, a major road running south of Interstate 10.

Wakefield, who organized this year's edition of Desert X with the guest curator Diana Campbell, said he was, like many people, moved to learn about Nichols's personal interests after his death. After the Desert X executive director Jenny Gil pointed him to the website where Nichols posted his photography, the curators began working on making space for his work in the biennial, which this year has a strong showing of artists of color.

The idea of turning roadside billboards over to artists has been part of Desert X since its start in 2017 as a sprawling, site-specific type of exhibition. That year, Jennifer Bolande used billboards to display landscape photographs that, from the right viewpoint, appeared to dissolve into the real mountains behind them. More recent billboards have featured socially or politically oriented photographs exploring Indigenous culture and history (Cara Romero) and reparations to Black people (Xaviera Simmons).



A Desert X installation rendering of Tyre Nichols's "Originals." Credit...GoFundMe Tyre Nichols Memorial Fund

The placement of Nichols's images along a busy street also seems pointed, since he was chased and beaten by Memphis police officers after being pulled over for a traffic stop. Wakefield said he hoped the presentation would "contrast the serenity and beauty of these images, levitated above the roadways, with the violence that happens on the side of the road, particularly to Black and brown bodies." "And in so doing," he continued, "we hope to make people think about the importance of traffic-stop reform."

Crump added that Nichols's family was grateful Desert X would bring attention to proposed amendments to California Senate Bill 50 that are aimed at prohibiting traffic stops for low-level violations. He called the bill "a much-needed step toward ending the violence Black people face when confronted by police."