

# The 'X' Factor: DesertX 2025 In Coachella Valley, California

By Tom Teicholz, Contributor. I'm a culture maven and arts enthusiast.

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Outdoor artworks, land art, site-specific installations speak to a tradition that exists outside museums and galleries, that is accessible and available to all willing to travel to a given destination, and which in many cases intervene in complimentary and contrasting ways with the environment.

*DesertX 2025*, taking place in the Coachella Valley (i.e. the greater Palm Springs area) March 8 through, May 11, features 11 artists who have created work for specific locations throughout the valley. Downloading the *DesertX* app gives you info locations and driving directions to each. Susan Davis, is the founder and President of *DesertX* and this year's co-curators are Neville Wakefield and Kaitlin Garcia-Maestas. The corporate sponsor is Jose Cuervo's 1800 Tequila (and there will be a DesertX Mexico).

The eleven artists featured in this year's iteration are a very diverse group that includes Agnes Denes, 94 years young, and Sara Meyohas, 33 years old, as well as Sanford Biggers, Alison Saar, Jose Davila, Cannupa Hanska Luger, Raphael Hefti, Kimsooja, Ronald Rael, Muhannad Shono, and Kapwani Kiwanga.

This is the fifth iteration of DesertX. Everyone still talks about Doug Aitken's 2017 *Desert X* installation, *Mirage*, a mirrored house. Other memorable works from Past Desert X are Nancy Cahill Baker's Augmented Reality installation in 2019 and Gerald Clarle's 2023 installation.

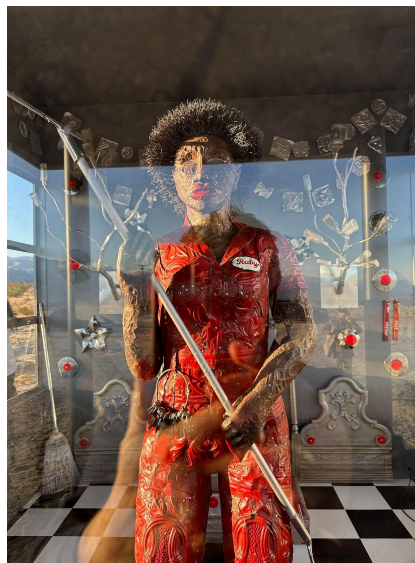
This year's DesertX may be the best yet. On opening weekend when I visited not all the artworks were open to the public yet (they probably all are by now).



Installation view Alison Saar, *Soul Service Station*, DesertX 2025

PHOTO BY LANCE GERBER COURTESY OF ALISON SAAR AND LA LOUVER

What were my favorites? Alison Saar's *Soul Service Station* is a remarkable artwork. It looks like a Depression-era gas station of the American West and is filled with reclaimed tin tiles and other items and materials. School children from throughout the Coachella Valley were engaged to create their own devotional objects for the interior of the station (introducing them to artmaking).



installation view of *Soul Service Station* by Alison Saar, DesertX 2025

PHOTO BY TOM TEICHOLZ, COURTESY OF ALISON SAAR, DESERTX AND LA LOUVER

Inside stands a life-sized hand-carved guardian of the station in service station overalls. Saar's recent sculptures have explored violence against women and the legacy of slavery. On occasion, her sculptural figures such as *Topsy*, have been fearsome and rage-bearing. However, *Soul Service Station* is meant as an oasis, a figure of pride, strength, and joy.

Outside the station there is a gas pump. Rather than the expected gas pump filler neck, there is an item in the shape of a conch shell. When you place it next to your ear, you hear a blues poem sung by the Los Angeles based poet Harryette Mullen.

*Soul Service station* is a must-see and I truly hope that, post-Desert X, it finds a permanent home. *Soul Service Station* was also sponsored by the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation. On site at the press preview was Kimberly Davis of Saar's gallery LA Louver who believes it will happen.



installation view of Sarah Meyohas' *Truth Speaks in Slanted Beams*, DesertX 2025  
PHOTO BY TOM TEICHOLZ, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DESERTX 2025

Sarah Meyohas' installation, *Truth Arrives in Slanted Beams*, uses a caustic spiral that leads from the road into the desert and then rises and falls looking like a piece of the Guggenheim Museum sunk in sand. The bends in the caustic creation surround desert plants. There are also reflectors that can be moved but that project words from the poetic phrase, *Truth Arrives in Slanted Beams*.



Jacob Jonas dance troupe, The Company, DesertX 2025, activation at artwork by Sarah Meyohas  
PHOTO BY TOM TEICHOLZ

At the press review, there was an activation at Meyohas' installation by the Jacob Jonas dance group, The Company. The dancers led in a file to the sculpture and moved around it doing a series of movements from Jonas' athletic, kinetic, dance vocabulary. It was a great collaboration (I know it was filmed – perhaps it could be an AR enhancement during the exhibition?). Regardless, the artwork stands on its own (literally and metaphorically) and is everything one hopes to find in a *DesertX* installation.



The Living Pyramid by Agnes Denes, DesertX 2025  
PHOTO BY TOM TEICHOLZ COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, DESERTX AND SUNNYLANDS

Agnes Denes' *The Living Pyramid* is the centerpiece at Sunnylands, the former Annenberg home in Rancho Mirage turned museum and conference center. It is a very large construction of terraces filled with live native plants. So although the form of the sculpture is constant, how it looks is constantly evolving and changing. At the press preview, Denes made the statement (via a filmed segment) that, "My pyramids are an optimistic edifice in the time of turmoil." As a further explanation, Denes says in the exhibition publication that "art exists in a dynamic, evolutionary world where objects are processes and forms are dynamic patterns, where measure and concepts are relative, and reality is forever changing."

Part of the experience, and the fun of *Desert X*, is driving around searching for the artworks. Waze and the *DesertX* app led me on drives through parts of the valley I'd never seen, including high mountain roads, and old downtowns in Desert Hot Springs and corners and canyons I'd never been to before.



Installation view Sanford Biggers, *DesertX* 2025  
PHOTO BY TOM TEICHOLZ

The other artworks I saw included: Sanford Biggers whimsical clouds that appear in the sky in Palm Springs; Jose Davila's uncanny marble blocks that make you think you are walking in a Roman ruin; Raphael Hefti's simple and elegant work, in a horizontal material is stretched across a canyon so that it twists in the wind and reflects light at different places when it does;

Ronald Rael who used a solar-powered robot to 3D print an adobe maze making a statement about the marriage of indigenous knowledge and current tech in ways that are cheap and environmentally sound; and Cannupa Hanska Luger who created a nomadic desert vehicle and mobile home as part of a post-apocalyptic futurist narrative, which will see the vehicle exhibited at three different locations in the Coachella Valley.

There are always plenty of reasons to go out to Palm Springs and other destinations in the Coachella Valley. DesertX 2025, however, presents a different way to experience the landscape, support not just the land but the people and the artisans who live there, You Should you want to support DesertX, there are ways to get involved and be a sponsor or donor or make a tax-deductible contribution. And, yes, there is also Merch, very cool T-shirts, hoodies, stickers etc....

If Art is about seeing, then DesertX 2025 challenges us to think about the desert, its past, its future, the wind, the ground, the indigenous plants, and ourselves and the world in new ways.