

# The Many Hands and Minds Behind Desert X

A celebration of the power of collective vision

AFRODET ZURI - 3 APRIL 2025



Desert X 2025 installation view of Sanford Biggers, *Unsui(Mirror)*, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy Desert X

Each time Desert X comes to life in the sweeping beauty of the Coachella Valley, its impact feels almost magical. Monumental art installations seem to emerge from the desert sands as if placed by the land itself. But the reality is a deeper and more profound story of collaboration, creativity, and relentless dedication. Behind the awe-inspiring works of art and the seamless visitor experience lies an intricate network of people, each bringing something vital to the exhibition. Desert X isn't just a celebration of art or the landscape; it's ultimately a celebration of the power of collective vision.

Desert X would not exist without the curatorial team. These are the visionaries who spend months immersed in research and dialogue, scouting out not only the artists but also the stories that will resonate in this stark yet stunning environment. Led by curators with a passion for contemporary art and its intersection with pressing global issues, they seek out voices that challenge, provoke, and inspire. The themes and works of Desert X reflect nuanced contemplation of topics like climate change, migration, or cultural heritage. It's not just about selecting beautiful art; it's about curating conversations that feel essential to our time.

**“As intersectional thinkers, artists are the thought leaders in the quest to find new and sustainable ways of thinking about and ultimately co-existing with this changing environment.”**

NEVILLE WAKEFIELD, DESERT X ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

“Climate change is probably the most pressing issue of our time and as the world gets hotter and drier the role of the desert as harbinger of our future becomes increasingly urgent,” comments Desert X Artistic Director Neville Wakefield. “As intersectional thinkers, artists are the thought leaders in the quest to find new and sustainable ways of thinking about and ultimately co-existing with this changing environment. Whether reflecting on adobe and ways in which ancestral building practices can be reconsidered through modern technologies or how the life cycles of plants can create temporal patterns based on the availability of sunlight, water and nutrients, Desert X provides a platform for artists to shape conversations around the future.”



Desert X 2025 installation view of Ronald Rael, Adobe Oasis, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy Desert X



And then, of course, there are the artists themselves. They are the heart of the event. Coming from across the globe, they bring an astonishing range of media, ideas, and techniques while also responding to the singular spirit of the desert. The Coachella Valley's vastness, its quiet, and even its extremes of temperature push them into bold and unexpected directions. An artist might draw upon the sun's searing brightness in their use of mirrors, or lean into the isolation of the landscape to craft an immersive sound experience. Every piece becomes part of this land, yet never loses the distinct fingerprint of its creator. For the artists, Desert X isn't just an opportunity to showcase; it's a dialogue between themselves, the location, and the audience

**“Desert X offers artists a rare opportunity to present their work within an expansive, unbounded landscape while engaging a diverse audience that ranges from local Coachella Valley schoolchildren to the global art world”**

KAITLIN GARCIA-MAESTAS, DESERT X 2025 CO-CURATOR

“Desert X offers artists a rare opportunity to present their work within an expansive, unbounded landscape while engaging a diverse audience that ranges from local Coachella Valley schoolchildren to the global art world,” says Desert X 2025 Co-curator Kaitlin Garcia-Maestas. “Here, an artist's vision becomes woven into the desert's real and imagined histories. In this context, the desert and its many communities serve as both curator and canvas, shaping each visitor's experience, which shifts with the season, the time of day, and the ever-changing conditions of the landscape.”



Desert X 2025 installation view of Cannupa Hanska Luger, G.H.O.S.T. Ride (Generative Habitation Operating System Technology), photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy Desert X

But artistry alone isn't enough to bring Desert X into being. Behind the scenes, a fleet of logistical wizards work tirelessly to transform vision into reality. The installations cross a staggering variety of terrains—from rocky hillsides to open sand dunes to local landmarks. Each site has its own complexities that are mastered by engineers, riggers, and installers. How do you anchor a massive sculpture in shifting sand? How do you transport tons of material through

narrow desert roads to build an ephemeral piece? Such challenges are met with ingenuity and a spirit of problem-solving.



Desert X 2025 installation view of Raphael Hefti, *Five Things You Can't Wear on TV*, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy Desert X

Not to be overlooked are the community partners, whose participation roots Desert X firmly in its regional context. These individuals and organizations—from local tribal councils to conservation groups and educational institutions—offer exhibition festival expertise, permissions, and perspectives that shape the exhibition’s identity. Collaborating with these partners ensures that Desert X remains a reflection of and a contribution to the region’s culture and community.

**“It would not be possible without the shared belief by all involved that art can inform, heal and transform”**

JENNY GIL, DESERT X EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

“Desert X is a collective endeavor that is driven by the passion, talent, skill, time and donations of thousands of people working alongside a constellation of visionary international artists,” says Desert X Executive Director Jenny Gil. “The exhibition’s model, that takes art outside of institutional walls, has created a paradigm shift in the way art can be experienced. Free and open to all, Desert X welcomes and engages a far-reaching local and global audience that amplifies the dialogue our artists seek to spur around vital themes and issues of our times. It would not be possible without the shared belief by all involved that art can inform, heal and transform.”



Desert X 2025 installation view of Alison Saar, Soul Service Station, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy Desert X

The volunteers, too, are indispensable. Often unseen yet always present, these dedicated individuals welcome visitors, offer guidance, and share the stories behind the installations. They are the face of Desert X, demonstrating an unbridled enthusiasm for the art and their desert home. Whether helping guests find the best route to an off-the-beaten-path work or sparking thoughtful conversations about the art, the volunteers create an atmosphere of accessibility and warmth. This writer was lucky enough to experience a volunteer at Alison Saar's work who not only took the time to explain the work to people and encourage visitors to pick up the seashells to listen to the recordings, he pointed out the best angles to capture the beauty of the work set against the natural backdrop.



Desert X 2025 installation view of Muhannad Shono, What Remains, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy Desert X

And then there's the land itself, which is less a backdrop and more a collaborator in the truest sense. The desert is sun-bleached and vast, almost alien in its quiet beauty. The way light changes the rugged terrain in the early morning or late afternoon creates a dynamic interaction with the art that transforms daily. It is this dramatic natural stage that inspires every decision and draws thousands of visitors every year. The desert demands respect and consideration, shaping

how installations are built, how visitors traverse the space, and how the exhibition interacts with fragile ecosystems.



Desert X 2025 installation view of Agnes Denes, *The Living Pyramid* at Sunnylands Center & Gardens, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy Desert X

Yet, despite this scale and complexity, Desert X feels seamless. That feeling is a testament to the combined efforts of countless people working closely together. Every conversation between an artist and a curator, every permit filed, every volunteer shift, and every logistical puzzle solved contributes to an experience that feels simultaneously monumental and personal.



Desert X 2025 installation view of Sarah Meyohas, *Truth Arrives in Slanted Beams*, photo by Lance Gerber, courtesy of the artist, Desert X, and Marianne Boesky Gallery

The artist, Sarah Meyohas elaborated on this spirit of collaboration with us, “Honestly, I was really floored by Kaitlyn and Neville. Both trusting in my vision, and also challenging me (which is not something that happens often) and that really guided the direction of the piece. Keep in mind this was my first time working at this scale and outdoors.”

Ultimately, Desert X succeeds because of its collaborative spirit. It’s a model that values different forms of creativity equally, and one that depends on a shared dedication to ideas,

storytelling, and place. For those lucky enough to encounter its works scattered across the desert floor, what they see is remarkable. But for those who have helped build it, what they know is this: Desert X is a work of art in and of itself, a true testament to what can be achieved when diverse talents unite under a common vision, in the most extraordinary of landscapes.