

Desert Sun.

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New Desert X documentary pulls the curtain back on 2021 exhibition

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A new film about the outdoor arts biennial Desert X pulls back the curtain on the behind-the-scenes discussions between artists and curators responsible for the installations dealing with questions about land rights ownership and stewardship, migration, and social justice.

Directed by Dylan Robertson and produced by Zoe Lukov, "Desert X 2021-the Film" is part of KCET's TV series "Artbound." A 24-hour online preview will be available starting at noon on Oct. 29 at desertx.org. It also will be shown on KCET at 9 p.m. on Nov. 3; 8 p.m. on Nov. 5 on PBS SoCal; and 10 p.m. on Nov. 9 on Link TV.

About 100 people watched a preview screening of the 60-minute film on Sunday night at the Rancho Mirage Amphitheater.

The 2021 exhibition was planned to start in February but was postponed to the following month due to a surge of COVID-19 cases. Lukov, who is also a member of the Desert X board, told The Desert Sun before the screening on Sunday the documentary was made to reach audiences who couldn't travel to the exhibition and make it more accessible.

"It was because of COVID that we made it, but in the end this is something that we would hope to continue because it was another layer of artists telling these stories and talking about these projects," Lukov said.

According to Desert X, the 2021 exhibition logged 650,000 audience visits to 10 art installations over nine weeks last spring.



The 2021 Desert X installation 'Never Forget' by artist Nicholas Galanin near Tramway Rd and Hwy 11 in Palm Springs, March 5, 2021. Photo by Jay Calderon

"They were already engaging with these issues (before 2020) and I think that as an audience we were ready to receive and hear it this year," Lukov said.

The film specifically delves into the lives touched by immigration, including the artists themselves.

César García-Alvarez, who co-curated the 2021 exhibition with Artistic Director Neville Wakefield, explains he's originally from a border town in Mexico and spent a portion of his life in California as an undocumented immigrant. He said he wanted to include a voice on migration as part of the exhibition with Eduardo Sarabia's "The Passenger."

A Desert X crew member describes the maze made of petates — traditional rugs woven from palm fibers that are used as sleeping mats and often carried by migrants — which evoked an emotional experience for his father as he walked through the installation and remembered his journey through the desert to the Coachella Valley.

Controversy surrounding the 2021 exhibition

The 2021 exhibition saw several controversies before it began.

A planned live smoke sculpture consisting of non-toxic, colored smoke by artist Judy Chicago planned at The Living Desert Zoo and Gardens in Palm Desert was canceled due to environmental concerns. There were also heated discussions with cities Desert X relies on for financial support and locations over the organization's 2020 international exhibition in Saudi Arabia and the content of proposed installations. None of these events are discussed in the film.

García-Alvarez only mentions the City of Coachella pushing back against Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey's "The Wishing Well," an installation made of yellow, plastic containers that many people in Ghana use to haul large amounts of water from cities to villages. He told that council in December it was intended as "a way to create a sense of kinship between two communities that have very particular, specific relationships to water and the accessibility of water."

"The Wishing Well" was moved to the James O. Jessie Desert Highland Unity Center in Palm Springs.

Coachella Mayor Steven Hernandez told The Desert Sun in March he felt the city council was "defending the eastern end of the Coachella Valley" when it raised concerns about the message of the proposed piece. He added that the issue of accessible drinking water should be brought to the attention of different communities than his, noting that his community is well aware of the issue already, with some areas still lacking clean water and sewers.

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"Desert X 2021-the Film" provides more context directly from the artists on the subject of their work than what's printed in the catalogs for each exhibition, and also offers a peek into their studios while at work on the pieces.

The film also details how the art is constructed on-site and how some installations, such as "The Passenger," were vulnerable in the desert climate. Sarabia is shown reinforcing the petates after a windstorm broke some apart. The heat and wind also affected the stacked dyed slabs of soil on Zahrah Alghamdi's "What Lies Behind the Walls" in Desert Hot Springs.

Lukov said she's hopeful there will be more documentaries on Desert X in the future so the exhibition reaches new audiences and provides more accessibility to the arts.

"I think art is one of the things that can connect us across all kinds of divides – geopolitical, social, religious – anything," Lukov said.