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Review

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Entertainment & Arts

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Jose Dávila, "The act of being together," 2025, marble (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)

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- The fifth installment of the Desert X biennial is the smallest yet, with just 11 sculptures on view around the Coachella Valley.
- A mammoth 'desert Stonehenge' by Guadalajara-based Jose Dávila steals the show.
- A service station for the soul by L.A.'s Alison Saar and a 1,300-foot mirrored "zip-line" by Swiss artist Raphael Hefti offer distinctive pleasures.

Desert X, the [biennial exhibition](#) of site-related installation art commissioned for varied locations in and around Palm Springs, continues to shrink.

From 16 artists for the inaugural in 2017, and the same number (plus three collectives) two years later, subsequent iterations have gotten steadily smaller. Just 11 artists are participating in the latest version, with only nine works ready at its March 8 opening. (The remaining two were expected to be completed soon.) Smaller isn't necessarily lesser, of course, although few of these projects are compelling. The somewhat more compact map of Coachella Valley sites being used this time is one benefit: No [driving 198 miles](#) to and from the vicinity of the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway and the edge of the Salton Sea, as was necessary in 2019.

Still, Desert X 2025 does feel thin. Only three installations stand out — one at the foot of a hiking trail in a Palm Desert park, the other two in dusty landscapes in Desert Hot Springs.



Jose Dávila, "The act of being together," 2025, marble (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)

The knockout is "The act of being together," a monumental construction of stacked blocks of marble by Jose Dávila, 51, who is based in Guadalajara, Mexico. Twelve massive chunks of white stone were quarried there, transported in their raw state across the border and piled in six pairs adjacent to a Desert Hot Springs wind farm. The shrewd, vivifying juxtaposition pits crude, primal, static stone, its huge weight pressing the ground beneath your feet, against sleek, industrially elegant windmills spinning overhead to catch the invisible airstream and generate similarly imperceptible energy.

Five chunky pairs are arrayed around a central stack. Inevitable are thoughts of ancient Stonehenge, or perhaps primordial cairns marking trails or burial grounds in premodern societies. You are at a ceremonial site, but here the ritual is distinctive and contemporary: The pomp and circumstance in biennial art exhibitions like Desert X beckon the faithful to assemble from far and wide. Borders get crossed, materially and conceptually. Dávila's sculpture is conscious of its role as an engine for "the act of being together."

What's beautifully articulated is the precariousness of that event. Dávila has stacked the stones carefully, with no sense of physical danger in the way one massive rock is placed atop the other. Yet, these compositions are not neat and clean. Upper blocks project out several feet from their base, sit on the edge or stand tall and lean.

These sculptural elements build on the history of simplified geometric forms in [Richard Serra](#)'s exceptional minimalist "[prop](#)" works, where massive plates of lead and steel lean against each other, providing contrarian weight to stand up and defy gravity's relentless pull. But, unlike the industrial materials that Serra leaned and stacked, this sculpture's classical legacy of marble is Dávila's chosen reference. Art's past is juxtaposed with the desert's advanced industrial turbines.

Dávila's huge sculptural ensemble appears permanent, which would be great, although its elements may be dispersed when Desert X closes on May 11, as these projects typically are. (According to a spokesperson, the sculpture's ultimate fate is under discussion.) About five minutes away, a poetic gas station by Los Angeles artist [Alison Saar](#) awaits your car's arrival.

The exhibition, organized by Desert X artistic director Neville Wakefield and curator Kaitlin Garcia-Maestas, director at Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, N.Y., includes additional installations of relatively routine fare by Sanford Biggers, Agnes Denes, Cannupa Hanska Luger, Sarah Meyohas, Ronald Real and Muhannad Shono. Still to come: Kimsooja and Kipwani Kiwanga.

The postpandemic sluggishness in arts fundraising and audience numbers still being felt by many cultural institutions may explain this year's more modest ambitions. The once-exciting biennial program also shot itself in the foot in 2019, taking a multimillion-dollar donation from [Saudi Arabia](#). Desert X is still co-organizing installations there, in what is a blatant case of art-washing to polish the soiled international reputation of a murderous, absolute monarchy where free expression is forbidden. Three works in the Coachella Valley are as worthwhile as any Desert X has yet produced, but that's barely enough for a festival.