

WALLPAPER*

Desert X 2025 review: a new American dream grows in the Coachella Valley.
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Desert X 2025 review: a new American dream grows in the Coachella Valley

Will Jennings reports from the epic California art festival. Here are the highlights



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Muhannad Shono

(Image credit: Desert X. photograph © Carlo Zamboni)

BY WILL JENNINGS LAST UPDATED 2 WEEKS AGO IN [FEATURES](#)

Of all art biennials and recurring festivals, Southern [California](#)'s Desert X is one of the largest in physical expanse. Spread across over 480 sq km of Coachella Valley's diverse landscapes, the only way to navigate it all – perhaps suitably for the US – is by car. A well-designed handy app includes a map to help visitors plot their own route around the 11 site-responsive installations found across desert dunes, rocky valleys, turbine fields, and formal gardens. With such driving required to tick off all the works, it might be useful to know where to refuel en route – though the map only includes a single, lonely service station across the whole of the artistic terrain.



Jose Dávila
(Image credit: Desert X. photograph © Carlo Zambon)

This fifth edition of Desert X arrives at a precarious time in US politics. Understandably in this climate, the curators don't lead with the inherent politics within the 11 works, but they are undoubtedly present throughout, even if secreted through the innocence of found materials, gentle gesture, and subtle undertone. This is perhaps all most redolent in Jose Dávila's stoic sculpture, *The act of being together*. It's a henge-like arrangement of roughly hewn stones, their critical mass and elemental solidity emphasised by rotating wind turbines surrounding it in all directions – the lightness of air reinforcing the weight of Dávila's material.

The rocks are marble, usually something carved into sensual statuary or polished into luxurious bathroom tiles, but here left as immense, irregular lumps, the shape they were when extracted from a Mexican quarry. The US-Mexican border is referenced through the migratory act of moving these stones, their newly shaped objectness in Coachella counterpointed by an extractive void in Mexico. They stand proud, glowing in golden-hour light, as if they were meant to be, as if they have accomplished their own idea of the American dream and found their celebrated place.

But we know that just as the stones' existence in the US is the embodiment of an absence in Mexico, the American dream as it has become is similarly rooted in precarity, inequality, and increasing aggression – as if one may only have a dream if another has a nightmare. But this idea of a dream need not be the case, and each of these Desert X artworks, in their own ways – related to each artist's lines of inquiry, the specificities of site, and contention of the elements – speaks to how a new American dream may be formed. One festival of sculpture won't change the world and give all the answers, but viewers can start to think about how to dream – and art can shift from grandiosity and pomp towards a measured, reflective and generous understanding of one another and the places we collaborate with to mutually survive.

Desert X runs until 11 May 2025

<https://desertx.org/>