

# MATZA Mojave

by William L. Fox, curator and art historian (Reno, USA), 2023

The Mojave is the smallest, driest, and westernmost of North America's five deserts. It is generally a high desert, and it is hot but not the hottest on average. And yet, it contains the lowest point on the continent and the hottest temperature record. Numerous science fiction movies have been made in it not just because it is the closest desert to Hollywood, but because it is so alien in appearance it offers few objective correlatives to contradict fantasy worlds. That's not irrelevant to the existence of its largest city, Las Vegas.

Contemporary artists from Switzerland have been working in this arid environment at least since Jean Tinguely (1925-1991) and Nikki de St. Phalle (1930-2002) detonated *Study for the End of the World No. 2* in 1962 for an NBC television special. They assembled dynamite bombs during four days in the parking lot of the Flamingo Hotel off the Las Vegas strip, then carried the explosives and discarded appliances thirty miles south to Jean Dry Lake to assemble everything and blow it up for a live broadcast audience. It was America's introduction to the fact that a dry lakebed was an experimental testbed for art as well as nuclear weapons.

Eight years later the artists Michael Heizer with his friends Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt used Jean Dry Lake as the surface into which they dug *Rift II*, a roughly fifty-foot-long shallow zigzag trench. It was an early emblematic work in the Land Art movement. Riffing off these earlier artists Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone was commissioned by the Nevada Museum of Art and Art Production Fund in New York to erect his *Seven Magic Mountains* nearby in 2016. The work sees a thousand visitors a day, people driving from LA to Las Vegas stopping in their tracks at the unexpected sight of seven 30-foot-plus stacks of brightly colored boulders on the edge of the playa.

One of the most spectacular projects proposed by a Swiss artist for the Mojave has never been built, although Christoph Büchel (1966-) first proposed *Terminal* as early as 2000. Consisting of a decommissioned Boeing 727 jetliner buried 38 feet deep near the town of Boron, the 153-foot-long aircraft would be reached by a long pedestrian tunnel. The experience would be intensely claustrophobic—the antithesis of flight, Rondinone's towers, and the very nature of the desert itself.

You can, in part, blame Honore De Balzac's existential romanticism for all this. Writing in 1830 in a short story titled "Une Passion Dans Le Désert" ("A Passion in the Desert"), his protagonist proclaimed North Africa as a space where "Oh! that can't be described... In the desert, you see, there is everything and nothing... it is God without mankind." The French-Algerian philosopher and writer Albert Camus (1913-1960), and

the Egyptian-born French-speaking poet Edmond Jabès (1912-1991) furthered European literary fascination with deserts worldwide as spaces in which experiments in the human condition were permitted. It did not impede the notion when the American military began to blow up atomic devices in the northern Mojave in 1951, a study for the end of the world number one.

In the middle of the Mojave, roughly equidistant from the Los Angeles and Las Vegas airports, sits the mostly abandoned town of Amboy, population 1-5 people, depending on the day and who is pumping gas, the main reason the town still exists. Amboy was an important fueling stop along the most remote part of the renowned Route 66 highway that connected Chicago to LA. When Interstate 40 opened in 1973 it was routed north of the town, and the settlement quickly died. There was no potable water, the sodium chloride from the nearby Bristol Dry Lake (and salt farm) pervasive throughout the local water table. The BNSF, which is the largest freight railroad in the United States, used to drop off water. No longer. The shipping containers labeled Walmart and Amazon have nothing to offer Amboy. In short, the town's derelict motel would make a perfect art base camp, which Severin Guelpa immediately realized.

From 2015-2017 Guelpa brought artists, engineers, scientists and more to the site, which offered a chance to hone survival tactics using as little bottled water as possible while exploring the flat black lava flows from nearby Amboy Crater, a dormant cinder cone that last erupted 10,000 years ago. At 250 feet tall and 1500 feet in diameter, it is not huge but incremental. At noon on a summer day, you could find yourself walking in 115°F heat, drinking a quart of water an hour, and making sure when you are 40 percent through your supply, you turn back, lest you run out. The last tranche of MATZA Amboy artists came to the town in 2017, a group of students from Arizona State University (ASU). ASU sits in Tempe just outside Phoenix—the students were used to heat and came prepared. Their “immersive learning” trip took place just months after the British writer and curator Neville Wakefield opened Desert X in the Coachella Valley, not quite a hundred miles to the southwest.

Wakefield, with his then-wife the artist Olympia Scarry, had founded an outdoor art exhibition, *Elevation 1049* in 2014 in Gstaad. The number refers to the elevation of the famed Swiss ski resort town (roughly 3400 feet). Wakefield told a *The New York Times* reporter that he could export his curatorial methodology anywhere, even to Death Valley. Well, not exactly—landscape interventions aren't welcomed by the National Park Service. But in February 2017 Desert X opened in and around Palm Springs with sixteen artist projects in the desert. As of 2023 it has now presented four exhibitions with a total audience of more than 1.7 million, and twice helped present two outdoor desert exhibitions in Saudi Arabia.

To give just one reason why the Swiss are enchanted with the desert is that you can find a rural location without a town, village, train station, or hotel within sight, something that is difficult to do in the deeply folded Alps. Yet, much of the Mojave is

reachable by car. It's the difference between a steeply compacted terrain with little intervening space (valleys and lakes and Switzerland) and lots of flat ground in between (the Basin and Range province within which most of the Mojave resides.) Severin Guelpa played with the differences by also holding residencies on the upper Altesch Glacier in the Bernese Alps. Since then, MATZA has extended its research-based approach to art and land use to various urban sites in Switzerland, as well as sites in Tunisia, Kenya and Colombia.

What MATZA Amboy offered was a quiet, out-of-the-way stage upon which to back up to the edge of what could be described, and to perform everything and nothing, a precursor for the acts that would follow. As the world heats, glaciers melt, and deserts become so hot planes can't take off for lack of lift, art on the Mojave becomes increasingly important as a performative research platform from which to assess how we conduct ourselves on the planet.

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