

Lines in the Sand

“Dry Immersion 3” welcomes artists to the desert of the real

By: Lynn Lieu

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If you can imagine a group of people without any knowledge of the world, chained and confined to a rock, dwelling with only shadows to learn from, these people would have come to rely on their senses and imagination to form what they believe is truth. But, if they emerge from the cave and view the reality of their shadow world, the truth may be far from what they imagined; if they emerge from the cave, they are no longer prisoners—at least according to Plato. But what if the prisoners never left Plato’s cave; if ethnographers never travelled to or lived in different communities; if journalists never conducted interviews; if artists never experienced the real world—what would become of philosophy, anthropology, news and art?

This weekend, 24 artists have the opportunity to exhibit work outside of Plato’s cave and in the desert. In a joint project, “Dry Immersion 3” by the UCR Sweeney Art Gallery and University of California’s Institute for Research in the Arts (UCIRA), artists were introduced to the desert, its people, politics and culture through lectures, tours and even meeting and interacting with the local residents.

“The project grew out of a convergence of personal interests and a growing sense that the desert is an area of special interest regionally and globally in debates about the future not just of our state but of the planet,” says Richard Hebdige, project curator and UCIRA’s desert studies project director. “Concerns with conservation, bio-diversity, climate change, resource management and the impact of expanding populations on wilderness areas pull deserts everywhere into focus as dynamic but fragile eco-systems that need to be studied and understood in their own terms, and symptomatically in terms of what may be coming for the planet as a whole.”

Hebdige, who is also a professor in two departments, art studio and film & media studies, at UC Santa Barbara, aims to get faculty and students working together to take art outside of traditional studios and into the real world to inspire and evoke non-traditional art through a collaboration with Sweeney. The project, now in its third phase, took artists from seven different UC campuses and immersed them with the desert.

“Historically people look at the desert as this exotic alien-like landscape. You painted the landscape; you captured the light on various things,” says Shane Shukis, Sweeney’s assistant director. “You had to work really hard at ignoring the reality that there is a sub-society out there; people are interacting with it not just as tourism. So, with the immersion concept, when we took 66 artists out to the desert it wasn’t a vacation—we took them away from that.”

The artists were then given the opportunity to propose a project surrounding their findings, experiences and newfound knowledge of the desert—similar to how anthropologists propose ethnographies. On March 6 and 7, the 24 selected artists will be displaying their work from performing arts and installations to paintings in the desert as well as in a gallery.

“Artists have a major role to play in that process of exploratory research and understanding, and of course they also have a special knack for approaching entrenched problems from new and untried angles,” says Hebdige. “There’s a very active engagement on the part of many young artists today . . . We move across the landscape like a cell phone in roaming mode—waiting to pick up whatever signals are available in the remote locations we find ourselves in.”

As philosophers continue to ponder, ethnographers continue to live in different communities and journalists continue to conduct interviews, projects like “Dry Immersion 3” help artists continue to chip away at the chains that confine us all.