

Art show 'out there' in open desert

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Photo Gallery: Dry Immersion 3 Desert Project

From the outside, with its broken or boarded windows and gaping holes in the wooden walls, it looked like any number of abandoned shacks in Wonder Valley, east of Twentynine Palms.

Inside, a buckled bed was strewn with flowers. A laptop on a pillow played a video of a group of adolescents acting out a ritual of resurrection. On a small dining table, whole and cut fruits and vegetables decayed around a watermelon-sized salt crystal. Photographs of figures on a salt bed were on the wall, echoed by a video of the same encounter playing out on a screen in the corner.

"The Deuce-Nine is a ghetto ..." was an exhibition/performance piece staged by three UC San Diego artists: Claire Zitzow, Elizabeth Chaney and Ash Eliza Smith. It was one of nine environmental installations making up Dry Immersion 3: Desert Projects, a joint venture of UC Riverside's Sweeney Art Gallery and the UC Institute for Research in the Arts that was on exhibit Saturday. Seven of the nine UC campuses participated.

Last year, when the project was initiated, a group of 60 artists and researchers from various UC schools made two trips to the Southern California desert. The idea was to familiarize the artists with the desert landscape and inform them on subjects such as land and water use, endangered species and even geological issues. They were challenged to create ways of illuminating those aspects of the desert in new ways. The Saturday event in Wonder Valley and a Sunday gallery exhibit at UCR's Palm Desert campus were the result.

Deck Hebdige, a board member of the institute and an art professor at UC Santa Barbara, helped organize the project. The sparse environment has long been an inspiration for artists, he said.

"The desert has always been square one that you go back to, some kind of transformative space," Hebdige said.

Chaney said the project she and her two collaborators produced drew on that tradition. They were first inspired by the salt bed on Bristol Lake, south of Amboy. Video and photos in their work show the artists interacting with the landscape, sitting, lying and even sinking into it. They subsequently took on a video project with some residents of Twentynine Palms and created a participatory piece with residents of Wonder Valley.

"We were interested in doing something that was working a little more with people in the area," Chaney said. They held a dinner party in the same abandoned shack where their work was displayed and were surprised by the creative people who showed up.

"We had an opera singer come and sing an aria," Chaney said.

The three said their display is a work in progress. Smith said they would eventually produce an edited video they plan to screen in the desert and in San Diego.

Pete Hawke, David Wicks and Elaine Hu went beneath the surface for "Trance: Resonance Field." The work invited observers to walk through a series of abstract ceramic plates hooked to recordings of seismic data from the nearby mountains. The plates pinged and rattled in response to the recordings.

"So much of what we see is a trace of what has happened before," said Hawke, 32, a UCLA artist. The idea of the piece, he said, was to "to bring to life these events that are constantly going on beneath us in some sense. You look at the mountains around here that were shaped by this kind of activity."

UCR art lecturer Ken Erlich's work appeared in the Sunday gallery exhibit. He designed photographic prototypes of three desert-going research vehicles, which he eventually hopes to build. One is a military-inspired vehicle, one more of a hippie microbus and the third is oriented more toward recreational use.

"I kind of conceived of a project that would facilitate other artists doing work in the desert," Erlich said. "It was a research vehicle, figuratively and literally."

This combination of research and art was at the heart of the project, Erlich said. He believes it is especially timely as the state deals with the budget crisis.

"A project like this allows people to see the value of what happens at the university," he said.

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