

## High Art for the High Desert

Joshua Treenial showcases High Desert artists in a weekend of exhibitions and performances.

By Shana Nys Dambrot

Video and light will illuminate a rocky hillock at dusk. Signs and objects will pierce the landscape with pop-inflected surrealism. A motorized prayer wheel will entreat the skies for rain. Curators Kóan Jeff Baysa and Bernard Leibov selected these and other art installations for the second edition of Joshua Treenial, their contribution to the constellation of arts and culture events propagating in the High Desert. The Treenial features about 15 artists and collaborators clustering their projects around the central hub of BoxoHOUSE, the Joshua Tree residency and exhibition space operated by Leibov.

The event launched in 2015 and returns March 31–April 2, 2017, with a long weekend of exhibitions, site-specific installations, and experimental artistry under the title *Event Horizon*, a term from theoretical astronomy signifying the interim after being ineluctably trapped in the gravitational pull of a black hole, but before being shredded into molecular confetti. In common usage, an event horizon is a metaphor for any significant point of no return. For these curators, it references an allegory and actuality of the High Desert’s environmental and resource issues.

Formerly the deputy director of the Judd Foundation, Leibov used to spend several months at a time in the desert and then return home to New York to exhibit the work of Joshua Tree artists. Five years ago, he permanently relocated, founded

BoxoHOUSE, and began inviting artists to residency programs. “I’m on a mission to bring people to J.T., not only to have a reprieve from urban life, but to wake up in general to the issues the desert highlights — the threat of generic development, environmental and resource urgencies, the possibility of creating an art-based economy in a natural setting — cultural tourism, for lack of a better term,” Leibov says. “In all these important ways and more, we see the Joshua Treenial as a destination event.”

The Treenial is a “parallel project” to the high-profile Desert X event (Feb. 25–April 30), which unfolds from Palm Springs to the Salton Sea and is the launch partner for the Mojave Desert Land Trust’s Reading the Landscape curriculum, which offers guidelines to artists working in desert locations. “The desert is a lot of things, but it’s not empty and it’s not a blank canvas,” Leibov says. “It’s very important to us that the Treenial is also a learning experience about the region and the environment.”

Visit [www.joshuatreenial.com](http://www.joshuatreenial.com) and follow @joshua\_treenial on Instagram.





## 5 to see at the Treennial

opposite:

### **Jesse Gilbert, *Rock Projections* (2015)**

Jesse Gilbert, a multimedia and generative video artist, will expand on the impressive rock projections he staged at the 2015 Joshua Treennial. He'll interpret the work *Event Horizon* as a real-time media event. "I have some ideas for live audio," Gilbert says. "I have in mind working with multiple projectors so that we can engage more of the outdoor space."

above:

### **Heimir Bjorgulfsson, *If I Could Only Right My Wrongs* (2015)**

Heimir Bjorgulfsson is interested in place making and geographical empathy. The Iceland native works in painting, drawing, photography, collage, and taxidermy — often at the same time — and has long felt the influence of the landscape on his life and work. He moved to Los Angeles about 10 years ago and fell in love with the High Desert, where he frequently goes to take the photographs that become part of his works. "All my work is about where I come from versus where I am," says Bjorgulfsson, who deploys an ornithologist's lexicon of birds and animals, rocky grounds, strange flora, and elements of culture and the built environment. "All this work is about questioning our relationship with nature. It's about bringing awareness through aesthetics."



left:

**China Adams, *Rock Walls* (2015)**

China Adams lives in Los Angeles and is drawn to the beauty, stillness, quiet, community, and skies of the High Desert. “There’s some marvelous experimentation happening out there,” she says. “The focus for so many artists seems to be about process, research, and development.” Last summer, during her residency at BoxoPROJECTS, Adams created a series of highly detailed, organic line drawings, some of which will appear at the Treenial. Toward the end of her residency, after working for almost two weeks directly beneath one of Joshua Tree’s stunning rock walls, she felt compelled to draw them. “The rock walls symbolically tie into many themes that intrigue me and inform my work,” she says. “Rock walls inevitably act as fortresses. They serve as hiding places for all types of creatures, provide secret passageways and shortcuts, block out harsh weather, and have a long history as hideouts for those on the run. On first glimpse we perceive the beauty of the rock walls without seeing what hides within them.”



center:

**Sant Khalsa, *Pray for Rain* (Detail)**

Sant Khalsa (see page 12) will exhibit gallery works that reflect the core tenets of eco-feminism, weaving in issues of climate change, resource justice, and women’s rights. Khalsa sees art as a tool for raising consciousness. For the Treenial, she’ll exhibit a sculptural installation, *Pray for Rain*, referencing the Tibetan prayer wheel. It’s a glass cylinder half filled with water and capped with a symbolic blue globe.



right:

**Sonja Schenk, *Red Shift (Day)***

Sonja Schenk is drawn to rocks, the secrets they keep, and the dark desert highways that lead to them. Her paintings and sculpture depict and evoke the endurance of geological formations against the Ozymandian entropy of man-made incursions into nature. She too is inspired by phenomenological experiences of the High Desert, particularly its light and atmosphere, as well as its history of secretive, often military-industrial experimentation. Her site-specific installation, *Red Shift*, consists of a large-scale, two-part sculpture painted black and infrared. During the day, it will appear black to the naked eye, but at night, using infrared technology like military-style night-vision goggles, a trail of infrared “breadcrumbs” will lead viewers a short distance into the desert to the installation site, where the sculpture will glow white. “*Red Shift* explores the edge of the visible, a liminal place where appearances are deceiving, not unlike that classic apparition of the desert landscape, the mirage,” Schenk says.