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Desert Sun.

Palm Springs declines to sponsor Desert X; OKs business aid program

BY Erin Rode JANUARY 29, 2021



For Desert X 2019, Los Angeles-based artist Sterling Ruby created Specter, a Fluorescent orange monolith that appeared as an apparition in the desert. *Courtesy of Desert X*

Instead of sponsoring Desert X, Palm Springs has voted to work directly with a Desert X artist to install public art in six locations along the median on Tahquitz Canyon Way. However, Desert X organizers say the work is being produced for their upcoming biennial, and the city would need to execute its own agreement with the artist after the exhibition closes.

Christopher Myers, the artist, told The Desert Sun that he was not contacted about executing an agreement an agreement directly with the city.

"The first thing that is odd about this for me is that the City Council hasn't spoken with me at all," Myers said. "So, it is odd if someone is doing an agreement with you and they don't speak to you about it. I'm really excited to be a part of Desert X, and I'm excited that the curator selected my work to be a part of Desert X."

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On Thursday night, the Palm Springs City Council authorized \$30,000 in public art funds for the installation of "Altanviro and Loper" by Myers. Council members chose to execute an agreement with the artist directly instead of going through Desert X in light of the arts organization's 2020 exhibition in Saudi Arabia.

But organizers of Desert X say that while the city could have decided not to have its own name affiliated with the art exhibition, circumventing Desert X to install the piece was not an option.

"We were expecting that it was within the full rights of the city to say 'No, we're not going to put our name on this,'" said César García-Alvarez, co-curator of the 2021 Desert X. "What was different for me was the notion of not only did they just want to not appear as a sponsor but they also wanted to completely remove Desert X from the project.

"Of course they're within their rights to not want to affiliate as a sponsor, but them wanting to completely erase Desert X from a project we produced is not within their scope."

Organizers of Desert X say the installation was proposed for the site specifically as part of the 2021 exhibition, and that the artist was bringing his art to the city because of their event. Myers said he supports Desert X's mission of bringing contemporary art outside of museums and to the public in communities that don't typically engage with contemporary art.

The next iteration of the outdoor biennial art exhibition was originally scheduled to run from Feb. 6 through April 11, but was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Desert Biennial, the nonprofit behind Desert X, partnered with the Royal Commission for Al Ula for a January 2020 exhibition in northwest Saudi Arabia. The partnership prompted some Desert X board members to resign due to concerns over the kingdom's human rights record.

Palm Springs residents and council members expressed concerns over the partnership during Thursday's City Council meeting.

"I support the belief that art transcends a lot of political issues," said Ron deHarte, president of Palm Springs Pride. "However, when art supports and attempts to bring credibility to an entity widely condemned for human rights abuses in a country where 50% of our own residents would be condemned to death, it is not right.

"Married men and interfaith sex are punished with the death penalty. We do not support the city of Palm Springs endorsing or funding practices enabling the efforts of Desert X."

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[Artist's Website](#)

Christopher Myers

Born 1974 | New York, NY

Christopher Myers is a multidisciplinary artist whose projects manifest in visual art, theatre, and literature. Through a practice deeply rooted in collaboration, Myers mines the intimate dimensions of the global, creating works that unveil relationships between distinct peoples and places.

Palm Springs City Council, on Thursday, opted to contract with artist Christopher Myers. The city will display Myers' "Altaviro and Ioper" sculpture along Tahquitz Canyon Way. *Courtesy City of Palm Springs*

Neville Wakefield, artistic director for Desert X, said the Saudi Arabia installation was in line with the organization's mission of cultural dialogue.

"From the inception of Desert X, our mission has been about bridging cultural divides, whether they are local or international. We believe we did that quite successfully in Saudi Arabia. We participated in a conversation that involved artists not just from Saudi Arabia and the region but from the United States and we had a number of firsts," said Wakefield, noting the installation's women artists and first example of figurative artwork in Saudi Arabia.

Councilmember Geoff Kors also expressed concerns over Desert X's spending, and noted that PS Resorts gave Desert X \$50,000 each year for the 2017 and 2019 events.

While Kors said that Desert X requested an additional \$12,500 to keep the electricity on for an electric flag installation but then turned the installation off anyway after it was granted the funding, the biennial's organizers disagreed with this account. They said they had informed PS Resorts that the installation, John Gerrard's "Western Flag," would only run until March 29, 2019 rather than the end of Desert X in April.

The city and nonprofit also disagree about how much funding has already been spent on the upcoming exhibition. For 2021, Kors said PS Resorts is only providing Desert X with \$10,000 citing concerns about how Desert X uses the funding, the organization's refusal to share its financial information and what happened in Saudi Arabia. Desert X organizers say they have provided PS Resorts with the requested financial information, and that PS Resorts has not agreed to provide \$10,000.

"Desert X announced they were going to Saudi Arabia for an amount of money that they're not sharing six months after Saudi Arabia executed 37 people in public executions, the majority of which were the Shia minority, five were allegedly gay men, and they beheaded those people in public... and executed 184 people that year. And six months later Desert X took money from them to go there," Kors said.

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"I just find that, given our stance on human rights, for us to support an organization that does that is not very different than supporting an organization that went to Nazi Germany to do an art exhibit during that time or to South Africa during apartheid."

García-Alvarez, co-curator of the 2021 Desert X, found "those comments from elected officials to be incredibly hurtful, for them to make those kinds of comparisons without even inviting us to have a chat or knowing about the artist."

Mayor Christy Holstege said she would like to see Desert X eventually continue in Palm Springs if the organization is able to "reform."

"I would like to see Desert X continue in the city of Palm Springs and see them reform their ways and stop partnering with human rights abusers," she said, adding that she supports not having the city listed as a sponsor for the 2021 event.

In November, the Palm Desert City Council was divided on whether to sponsor Desert X after the organization received money from Saudi Arabia, and voted 3-2 to sponsor the event with a \$20,000 contribution paid over two years.

Myers' public art piece was meant to remain in place for five years. It includes sculptures with draping banners that tell the fictional story of "two ranchers — one Mexican and one African-American — whose personal adversities and love for raising horses lead them to creating a welcoming commune in the place that would eventually become Palm Springs," according to a description from the artist.