

CURATE JOSHUA TREE

Interview with: Aili Schmeltz



Tell us about where you are from and how you ended up here in the desert?

I first fell in love with Joshua Tree in the mid 1990s. I visited often to hike and climb in the park, and we didn't leave the park much except to run into town to resupply. The town of Joshua Tree was much different then. I grew up in the Midwest, raised by first-generation immigrants from Finland, a family of weavers, builders, and bakers. After leaving the Midwest I lived in between Portland, Oregon and Tucson, Arizona for many years, back and forth seasonally, making the best of the diverse climates. I ran my own business then making hand

bound books while continuing my art studio practice and renovating a house I had bought in Tucson, a broken down 1907 edition in the historic 'red light district' of town called 'Dirty Dolly's'. It was during this period when I cut my teeth with desert gardening and house construction while working towards my MFA in sculpture at the University of Arizona. The Sonoran desert was one of my best teachers during that time, implanting the desert bug that stubbornly took hold. A few years later I moved to Los Angeles for my art career, and landed in a 1954 Cardinal vintage trailer that I rebuilt and lived in for four years in Venice Beach. I lived in that trailer in exchange for transforming the grass-filled yard into an edible garden. Living minimally and compact allowed me to have a large studio and travel without having to have a full-time job; it was a pretty great gig. Just after the financial crash, my partner and I bought a house in Eagle Rock and I began to look for property in the high desert, at first with the idea of having land to build experimental structures on. A couple of years went by looking and refining my ideas, until I found most of what I was looking for in Outpost, and as it happens with these things, the stars aligned and all signs pointed to GO.

You are really active in the desert when it comes to the community. Tell us about Outpost Projects, how it started, what its mission is, and what role it plays here in the desert.

There has always been a collaborative aspect to my studio work. There is something highly satisfying about working as a group creatively on something bigger: the window into others' processes fascinates me. My collaborative projects include videos of tours of strangers' homes and their objects in Berlin, a short film done in Mexico while I lived there during the H1N1 or 'Swine Flu' epidemic, a project documenting cave dwellers in Cappadocia, Turkey, a road trip project from Marfa, TX to LA getting to know strangers through objects I gave them, and most recently a Mojave Native Seed Ball project here in the Joshua Tree area. In 2011 I co-founded Los Angeles Art Resource, a free online resource for artists that posted arts opportunities, studios, jobs, etc. LA Art Resource lasted four years, and it was a definite labor of love: a community service that aimed to share resources among artists, and acted as a counter weight to the artists out for themselves with a competition based attitude. I think of Outpost as a project tied to my studio practice, a large-scale sculpture essentially, and consequently in a continual process of being reconsidered. Conceptually, Outpost is intended to provide guests a rare opportunity to live inside of a contemporary art exhibition within the breathtaking desert environment. In this context, the domestic space and the body's interaction of form gets reconsidered as well. Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* and Rudofsky's *Architecture Without Architects* continue to be highly influential in my ideas of Outpost. I see it as a beautiful space to look, make, gather, think, read, and talk.

Outpost Projects has evolved as an exhibition space as I invite different curators to put together shows of their own design. Included in that invitation is the opportunity for the curators to organize events, workshops, retreats, or gatherings within the duration of their exhibition. We have also hosted weddings, magazine release parties, filming's, writers' and artist retreats, film screenings, and university programs on the property.

You are also a part of a permaculture group here in the high desert. Can you talk about the group and its significance in your life and work?

My interest in Permaculture was born out of my love of plants and gardening, and being outside. Permaculture techniques are derived from the study of natural systems, and applying observations of natural systems to earth care and repair to regenerate damaged ecosystems and communities. That is a pretty general definition, I realize, and there are many aspects to it, some more realistic than others. The five acres that Outpost Projects is on was a foreclosure property with a jackrabbit homesteader cabin on it, a structure that is commonly referred to as a 'built more' cabin, where different owners kept adding rooms to the original 1958 cabin. The land is in a little pocket of lush pristine Mojave Desert loaded with Joshua Trees, chollas, creosote, etc., but also has areas of pretty damaged desert ecosystem from the previous owner who was a bit of a hoarder. After months of demolition inside and outside of the house, I was left with a blank slate shell of a house and open patches of decomposed granite dirt. I started initially going to the Permaculture team meetings to get some advice on what to plant, what grows well, what the challenges were here, and to meet the real deal locals who hold the secret powers. Even though I had a lot of experience growing things in the Sonoran desert, I soon learned that the Mojave is a completely different can of worms. This slice of the Mojave gets an incredibly low amount of water per year, somewhere around 3-5 inches annually, and the temperatures swing wildly. The property is on a mesa at about 3600 ft., so the wind is pretty much always blowing. From the Permaculture group I got a ton of advice from experienced, interesting folks, including some veteran gardeners of the area who have many years of wisdom to share. My involvement in the group itself waxes and wanes depending on my schedule and energy levels, but I continue to study the techniques and ideas on my own, as I am able.

In the last two years since we have planted dozens if not hundreds of native trees and plants on the property experimenting with permaculture techniques such as water harvesting, olla irrigation pots, planting on contour, guild planting, swales, and gabion walls. These ideas from permaculture are entering my artwork in a very significant and interesting way right now; this integrative manner of research shifts the conversation into unexpected pathways.

<http://transitionjoshuatree.org/get-involved/permaculture-project-team/>

Your latest work really pulls from the landscape, in particular the sunset. Can you talk about the process of this new body of work and what you are thinking about?

This new body of work I started this summer in the studio at Outpost is called Object/Window/Both/Neither. I just finished building the studio space in June in a renovated garage and attached shed, so this summer of working was a celebratory retreat for myself. The idea behind the series developed as I was renovating the house, painting the interior walls a pure glowing white, an effect that pops the landscape through the large windows forward spatially, becoming the object, the walls in turn recede to backdrop. This is an eye game that I have played since I was a kid, letting my vision slip into figure/ground obscurity. The pieces that began the series I consider to be both sculptures and paintings, windows and objects. I wander the desert often, watching the light flatten and then sculpt the shapes. The land and plants continually shape shift, form and erode, erase and reconfigure. The paint is applied to the canvas covered panels to emphasize the contrast of viscosity, so that the extreme difference of super glossy to ultra matte color vibrate off of one another to create a moiré effect as you walk around the work, emphasizing the performative object-hood of viewing sculpture.

The shapes are abstractions based on the view of the mesas, the wash, the rugged lines of earth to sky, out of the windows as I worked. The palette is of the sky at different times of the day, dawn and dusk primarily; the preliminary sketches for the pieces are shapes cut out of paper creating a shaped frame,

then photographed by isolating a small portion of the sky within that window. The technique is very elemental, stripping the sky of its context, a direct reference to James Turrel's Skyscapes.

You are between two worlds, like a lot of the people out here: Los Angeles and Yucca Mesa. What has this dual living experience been like?

Outpost is definitely my escape hatch from the city, from the noise, from the car. I am pretty lucky to have a big yard and garden in Los Angeles and a large studio there that I adore, so my city life is pretty mellow compared to many. I love Los Angeles for its art community, the museums, the galleries, the music, the big ideas...the ceiling is high and the possibilities are endless. I continue to study the history and architecture of the city too, full of drama and intrigue; this continues to be an inspiration for my studio work as it has been for many years. In contrast to my life in the city, I need open space in order to recalibrate, and the desert has always been a big part of me, so I really enjoy my time here—it feeds me in many ways. I think of the desert and city sensibilities as two very intertwined root systems of who I am.

Can you tell us about your influences, your conceptual framework, and the context in which your work fits in to a larger dialogue today?

I came up as a sculptor in an environment that was pretty male and large-sculpture oriented, so I sought out alternatives to read and look at such as Lee Bontecou, Lucy Lippard, Gego, Anne Truitt, Agnes Martin, and Eva Hesse. I studied the Eccentric Abstraction show that Lippard curated, and at that time I was making large-scale soft sculpture out of welded vinyl, steel, and wood.

When I moved to Los Angeles I continued to make sculpture and large drawings that were informed by the history of Los Angeles and movie industry building methods, so I was looking at brutalist forms and architecture such as Eduardo Chillida, Carl Andre's cedar sculptures, Sol Lewitt's drawings, the artist of the California light and space movement, Psionic Generators, and reading Mike Davis, Norman Klein, Joan Didion, John Fante, Carey McWilliams, and loved the documentary of Los Angeles Plays Itself. During this period I became obsessed with Spomeniks, WWII monuments in the former Yugoslavia, large concrete memorials to a philosophy that was no longer championed by the culture, so the pieces soon became abandoned and forgotten. This fine line of monument to sculpture continues to intrigue me.

For the last couple of years since developing Outpost I have been studying desert homesteading, female homesteaders, the architecture of the jackrabbit homestead cabin, flora and fauna of the area, and reading desert based novels and memoirs. As far as artists that I look at I am still obsessed with the drawings of Gego, Lucy Skaer, Wyatt Kahn, vintage textile patterns—the list of artists that I love is endless.

The concepts of the work are born from places, history, and books. The Tomorrowland series was based off of the history of Los Angeles and were monuments to philosophies of mid century America. The Psionic Generators combines an interest in utopic architecture and philosophy to investigate forms that claim to be 'ESP activating' from a 1970's New Age book from a family archive. Then the most recent Object/Window/Both/Neither body of work, as I spoke of earlier, is working with ideas of object-hood, space, and seeing.

What's next for you? Do you have anything on the horizon you would like to share?

Right now there are a bunch of irons in the fire. Of course in a few weeks I will have my desert studio open for viewing during the Curate Joshua Tree show at Outpost August 22. I'm really excited to share the new work with the desert community; I look forward to the conversations and feedback. There are some large scale sculptures I plan to build for the desert property soon, as well as building out the studio here further with a sculpture yard and shop outbuilding which is exciting. Then are a few group exhibitions planned for the next couple of months in Los Angeles, and a stint at Cal- Earth to learn earth-building techniques to implement here in the desert. The new year will bring some interesting projects in Arizona, residencies and exhibitions in Europe, and a show at the Pasadena Museum of California Art.