

ARTFORUM

DRY GOODS

Andrew Berardini on Desert X 2021

April 29, 2021

Cocurated by artistic director Neville Wakefield and Cesar Garcia-Alvarez, the current edition of Desert X promises on its website to be an exhibition that “explores the desert as both a place and idea, acknowledging the realities of people who reside here and the political, social, and cultural contexts that shape our stories.” The Desert X app, with its chartreuse “x” on a pitch-black map background, guided us to the exhibition’s thirteen commissioned artworks and installations (not all of which were installed when we visited) scattered across the Coachella Valley, an exurban settlement best known for resort towns like Palm Springs and Rancho Mirage and its epic, eponymous musical festival. Punctuated by walled retirement communities alongside a few posh neighborhoods and vacationer enclaves, it’s mostly populated by those of more modest means—the inexpensive ranch houses and mobile homes an invitation to those with fixed incomes, the working poor, and just about anyone who has been forced to live, or simply wishes to live, near the edges.

Water is a serious issue for the denizens of the desert, and Serge Attukwei Clotey’s dual cubes, laced together with used jerricans from his native Ghana and erected on the manicured grass of a nondescript community park, captured a strong and thirsty story. In many parts of Ghana, freshwater for daily use is found only in those jerricans, usually carried home from a water source at great difficulty. As I looked at the yellow fragments of the water cans pooled around Clotey’s cubes of the same material, yielding to grass that disappeared into the desert sand mere steps from this sculpture, the idea, material, and placement of the artwork took on an elegant conceptual unity, connecting these vastly different places and their shared need for this foundation of all life.



Serge Attukwei Clotey, *The Wishing Well*, 2021.