

# Art and Design in the California Desert

By Charles  
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Photo credit Steve King. Courtesy of Royale Projects.

Phillip K. Smith's *Lucid Stead*.

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MCA Santa Barbara Tours Palm Springs, Joshua Tree

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Modernism Week, the annual gathering in Palm Springs to celebrate all things mid-century, turned nine this year, and I joined in the festivities as part of a group from the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara. MCASB director Miki Garcia served as our tour leader, and she arranged a series of adventures that took us from the heart of Modernism Week's mid-century obsession, through the homes of some of the area's most well-heeled art collectors, and finally out into the high desert of Joshua Tree, where contemporary artists are reinventing the modernist impulse. From the exclusive gated communities of the Vintage and the Reserve in Indian Wells, where we saw fabulous private collections of contemporary art, to the relatively modest and highly appealing modernism of the Edris House, and on to contemporary artists' homes and studios in Palm Desert and Joshua Tree, in just three days we managed to cover a lot of ground.

Even before I met up with the group, as I checked into the Ace Hotel, my journalist-on-a-budget choice of lodging, I was already immersed in the stuff of mid-century legend, as the Ace is adjacent to Twin Palms, the original Alexander family home development, and the shape of its large central swimming pool mimics the instantly recognizable

butterfly roof design that is the signature feature of Alexander's celebrated architectural team of Palmer and Krisel.

Just a few miles down Route 111, the others were exploring the maze-like interior gardens of the Parker, another recently restored gem, albeit of a more refined cut and higher carats than the funky chic Ace. That's where we gathered the next morning before being whisked off to the Reserve, an exquisite development in Indian Wells where the highest standards of luxury home building have been mated with a landscape design aesthetic that's considerably less Bel Air/Beverly Hills than has been the standard in previous decades. Sitting demurely within this meticulously graded compound that bristles with succulents, cacti, and modern architecture, Marlene Baumgarten's home presents an oasis of high modernist taste in its purest form. Peter Halley, Robert Mangold, Joel Shapiro, and many more of the greatest names in contemporary art were on the walls (and the floor) here, but all in the service of an exquisite sensibility in which less is more.

At Donna MacMillan's spectacular home in the Vintage, everything is on another scale. At this giant custom home, the moat and drawbridge arrangement so beloved of these desert dwellers is exaggerated into something fantastic, with huge sculptural elements to either side of the walkway and a giant ball of rock seemingly floating on the waters of a large fountain. Inside, under 40-foot ceilings, are hundreds, perhaps thousands of artworks, including a giant wall of large glass flowers by Dale Chihuly and another room with glass floor panels that reveal an underwater stream of Chihuly seaflowers.

The finale of this day was a cocktail party sponsored by Modernism Week at the Edris House, an E. Stewart Williams design on West Cielo Drive in Palm Springs. Hewn out of the rocks and situated carefully in its natural setting, the Edris House is a marvel of mid-century sustainability and tact. Beautiful knotless Douglas fir gives the built-in furniture an organic feeling. The crowd was dressed for the '50s, in classic resort wear, and a guitarist plucked bossa nova rhythms as the sun set behind the pool and its twin palms.

The next morning, we convened at the Academy of Palm Springs at the Parker with architect Karl Kras as our professor. He outlined the history of the modernist movement in architecture and traced the emigration of influence as students of the Bauhaus and acolytes of Le Corbusier moved from Europe to the major American cities and then to the desert. Kras linked the modern style to its roots in industrial design and made connections that were visible everywhere we looked for the remainder of our journey. In particular, he emphasized the steel frame post and beam construction of classic modern buildings as the material basis for a romantic embrace of space and light. Walls vanish, or become windows, as the distinction between inside and outside permanently blurs. For many of us, the opportunity to discuss and reflect on the connections between the people for whom these amazing homes were built and the style in which they were constructed was a special treat, investing the visual dazzle of the desert with a strong sense of human connection.

From there it was time to visit the Heather James gallery, a big space on the corner of Portola Avenue in Palm Desert where curator Chip Tom showed us around and treated us to a delicious lunch that was served in the gallery. The Heather James gallery contains many different types of mostly modern and contemporary art, from Alexander Calder and Andy Warhol to Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali. Tom was particularly interesting when discussing the work of Tony de Los Reyes, whom Santa Barbara art lovers will remember from his 2010 solo show at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art called *Chasing Moby-Dick*. The artist, in addition to being on view at Heather James, is also a part of the new show that Tom curated for the USC Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, a must-see exhibit called *The Other Side: Chinese and Mexican Immigration to America*.

Next we went to Rick Royale's gallery in Palm Desert before heading out to the studio of one of Royale's artists, Phillip K. Smith. The latter is in a top-secret location and contains some of the most exciting work that we saw on the whole trip. Smith is influenced by the gamut of California Light and Space pioneers like James Turrell and Robert Irwin, but his youthful enthusiasm for technology has paid off in a big way. His recent high-desert project known as "Lucid Stead" became an overnight viral sensation this fall, and he is on the verge of another explosive statement that will be very much in the news this April.

Saturday was an early call as we headed out to the high desert to see the home and the work of an important figure in the Joshua Tree art scene, Andrea Zittel. Her “experiments in living” have set the tone for a new generation, and her desert projects are truly mesmerizing. From there we moved to the high desert sites themselves, including the Krblin John Kabin of Eames Demetrios’s deeply eccentric Kymaerica and the moving folk protest sculpture of the Noah Purifoy Foundation. Our two-part farewell to the desert began in the grandeur of the Ranch Projects and its current installation by UCSB’s own Gustavo Godoy and ended with a hearty dinner and live music at Pappy & Harriet’s Pioneertown Palace, a high-desert honky-tonk and a Joshua Tree institution. As the sun set over the desert, the big plate-glass windows of Pappy & Harriet’s darkened and gradually became mirrors of the colorful scene inside, making for an unscheduled and anonymous art experience fully in line with those that had come before.

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