

Finding beauty in detritus in the Mojave Desert

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Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Museum of Assemblage Sculpture in Joshua Tree. ([Chris Goldberg](#)/CC BY-NC 2.0)

In the Mojave Desert, a post-apocalyptic menagerie of 100 or so sculptures rises from the dust.

Visitors, often arriving from long distances, wander among the large works built from junk: toilets, television sets, tires, broken keyboards, and other found objects.

There is a snake-like installation made from lunch trays, walk-through structures filled with castoff clothing, VCRs, bottles, and folded newspapers, and bowling balls fashioned into a gigantic Newton's cradle.

This is Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Museum of Assemblage Sculpture, the life's work of one of California's most fascinating artists.

Purifoy was born in rural Alabama in 1917. He fought in World War II, then emerged later as an influential assemblage artist in 1960s Los Angeles, where he created sculptures from the rubble of the Watts riots and led the Watts Towers Art Center.

In 1989, he fled to Joshua Tree. "I wanted to do an earth piece," he once explained to a journalist, "and you can't get that much land in Los Angeles to do an earth piece."

For the next 15 years, Purifoy constructed his magnum opus on a 10-acre lot at the end of a dirt road. The high-desert setting—silent, vast, and severe—seemed to heighten the strangeness of the works.

Purifoy died in 2004 at the age of 86. The Noah Purifoy Foundation was created to look after the open-air museum, a mission that has been tempered by the artist's stated belief that the desert itself was his collaborator.



"Aurora Borealis" ([Channone Arif/CC BY 2.0](#))

"I do assemblage. I don't do maintenance," Purifoy told the L.A. Times. "What nature does is part of the creative process."

Still, the foundation has worked to prolong the life of the sculptures—touching up paint and adding guy wire to make sure things don't fall—while acknowledging that some of it will be lost to the elements.

"Obviously there's diminishing returns on a lot of the work," said Joseph Lewis, the foundation's president. "But some of it will stand the test of time."

Lewis said Purifoy's legacy, beyond his desert shrine, is in the inspiration the African-American artist spread throughout the art world—highlighted in a major retrospective at Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2015—especially within the black community.

"His conceptual footprint is very, very large," Lewis said, "and we want to make sure that that is put into the history books and into the canon."

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“No Contest (Bicycles)” ([Helen Gordon/CC BY 2.0](#))



“Bowling Balls I” ([Chris Goldberg/CC BY-NC 2.0](#))



"Toilet Bowl Sculpture" ([Alison Jean Cole/CC BY 2.0](#))



A sculpture of stacked chairs is held in place by beams and wires. ([Helen Gordon/CC BY 2.0](#))



"65 Aluminum Trays" ([Chris Goldberg/CC BY-NC 2.0](#))



"The Kirby Express" (Christopher Michel/[CC BY 2.0](#))



"Earth Piece" ([Chris Goldberg/CC BY-NC 2.0](#))