

# A Post-Apocalyptic Town on the Salton Sea Has Become Home to SoCal's Most Radical Art Fest

BY CARMIEL BANASKY

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A rehearsal at the Bombay Beach Opera House

*Jennifer Wiley & Frank Martinez*

**Back in the 1960s, Bombay Beach was the kind of Salton Sea resort town where celebrities such as The Beach Boys would spend their weekends sunbathing and waterskiing.** Today, it's a town of mostly dilapidated double-wides, nine blocks deep and five blocks wide. There are just over 100 full-time residents, and two bars to keep their thirst quenched. And this past weekend – the first weekend of Coachella, incidentally – the town became home to the Bombay Beach Biennale, a "secret" art festival, now in its second year, that's been described as a cross between an art conference and Burning Man.

"This is a suburb of the moon," said Jake, whose grandfather owns Fountain of Youth Spa in nearby Niland. The RV park and hot spring served as my base for the weekend. Jake says people there regularly tell him that it would be the best place to die. Sitting in the mineral pool with a dusty view of trailers across the California badlands, one man was eager to tell me he was born in Redding in 1935 and has been coming here with his wife for 40 years. When I told him where I was heading, he yelled out, "Bombay Beach?!" then shook his head and covered his face with his hands. Other RV park residents were excited to join us at the festival, among them Bridgette, a woman in her 70s who travels alone in her VW van. But, as I soon found out, it's not for everyone.

The Salton Sea, which exists because of an engineering mistake – it overtook an irrigation canal in 1905 and filled the basin – was once an active recreation area that represented luxury and privilege. Now the sea is disappearing, and the more the shoreline recedes, the more toxic the air becomes. It's still California's largest lake and an important stopover for migratory birds. (The state has established a [10-year restoration plan](#), and residents are hopeful.)

This was the setting for the biennale, but how does an art festival with more than 100 artists and performers fit into this delicate ecosystem? And what does it add?



A scantily clad bartender at the Bombay Beach Club

*Jennifer Wiley & Frank Martinez*

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My first stop at the fest was a Mad Hatter–esque tea party, where cake pops (made by a local family) and marijuana joints and edibles were passed around while fairy women made bondage art in the branches. Along the beach was a lifeguard stand turned into a psychedelic space station. Colorful smoke bombs set off at sunset through large sea-creature cutouts asked us to remember where we were, while the outdoor bar next door (tended by men in yellow bikini briefs) asked us to forget it.

On first glance, it seemed the biennale was a town on top of a town – a living enactment of one civilization burying another, without much thought to what came before. But as I visited more exhibits and spoke to both residents and organizers, it became evident that this was not a typical festival that leaves its environs worse for wear. While its next-door neighbor Coachella has come to be defined by branding, hashtags and which indigenous headdress one might appropriate, the Bombay Beach Biennale is an experiment in civic engagement.



A house painted by the legendary Kenny Scharf

*Jennifer Wiley & Frank Martinez*

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One Bombay Beach resident, Johnny, hailing from Monroe, Louisiana, told me that when he was a truck driver and drove through years ago, he'd wondered how anyone could live out here. Now he's been in Bombay Beach for eight years, on the main drag of the festival, which he calls "beachfront property."

"I live in the epicenter on beautiful E Street," he says.

Stefan Ashkenazy, an artist and hotel owner who is one of the festival's three founders, said, "We've been actively going to town hall meetings and staying engaged with the locals. They are the people who make the place so interesting." When I asked if there was any discontent, he said, "A few don't want any change." Last year there were noise complaints, so this year they built a sound wall. "We're open to criticism so we can improve," he said.



The drive-in is populated with old, broken-down cars.

*Jennifer Wiley & Frank Martinez*

The founders bought up several properties and they consider the Hermitage Museum (designed by artist Greg Haberny), Bombay Beach Opera House (designed by artist James Ostrer), and drive-in theater permanent gifts to the town. "The whole idea is to create art that stays and lives here, that enhances the town and embellishes its off-beatedness," Ashkenazy says. A couple of local artists displayed their work, including *Silver & Light*, which they claim is the largest camera obscura in the world.

One of the organizers, Jen Tighe Harpur, said that Bombay Beach residents feel they have a lot of offer. "They want to keep the town alive. Towns here are dying away. This festival brought people."

The festival is completely free and self-funded. This meant free cocktails, meals and oysters for hundreds. The only money exchanged went to a local BBQ trailer and the Ski Inn, the bar that somehow accommodated everyone, with a local or two helping behind the counter.

Emphasis was put on enhancing rather than bettering. Artists fell in line with this ideal, embracing the spaces they were granted and asking permission of the town. The Windmill House (designed by Jen DeNike) was a video installation amidst an abandoned life. In one room, the original furniture was strung up and suspended in midair as if it were being swept away by a dust storm. Meanwhile, the drive-in movie theater – a collaboration between Ashkenazy and Sean Dale Taylor – was packed with decaying vintage cars, which, not unlike the fish bones on the shore, spoke to the nostalgia that is part of the fabric of the town.

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Inside Jen DeNike's Windmill House

*Carmiel Banasky*

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TICKETS

[Improv Open Mic Happy Hour](#)

Tue., May. 23, 5:45pm

TICKETS

[Mike Cano & Friends](#)

Tue., May. 23, 8:00pm

TICKETS

[Kipp Hart and Friends](#)

Wed., May. 24, 8:00pm

TICKETS

[Youth Musical Theatre Presents The Drows...](#)

Thu., May. 25, 7:30pm

TICKETS

Johnny told me he was too busy to attend the festival. But at least a few of his neighbors participated. At the opera the first night and the ballet the second night, which featured San Francisco Ballet principal dancer Maria Kochetkova, an older man wearing a shirt that read “Deplorable” swooned and exclaimed over and over how beautiful it was.

When I asked Johnny what he thought of the biennale coming into his town, he said it was great, and that the trailers the festival bought were in bad need of repair. In the same breath he said, “This year

is twice as big. I like solitude. I might have to leave next year.” He had been the one to flag me down to talk, but I didn’t argue. “One more thing,” he said, eyeing me and my blindingly white skin: “You wouldn’t last here.”

I would argue that none of the festivalgoers would last. But hopefully we participated in something lasting and wanted.



*Jennifer Wiley & Frank Martinez*