



# CAN ARTISTS SAVE THE SALTON SEA?

*The creative set on  
Bombay Beach might be  
charting the course.*

BY STEVEN BILLER





WE

WERE SOMEWHERE near H Avenue, climbing the berm that separates the tiny town of Bombay Beach from the sick and shrinking Salton Sea, when an aria pierced the gale-force wind and stopped us in place.

The conditions were cold, dark, and gusty. Yet the voice of Kate Feld, a soprano from L.A., carried all the way from the Bombay Beach Opera House, an upcycled dwelling on E Avenue with a bright-blue façade that opens to audiences gathered in the front yard and on the street. She gave us a brief, beautiful moment in the unforgiving elements but had finished performing by the time we walked there.

On the empty adjacent lot, a hand-painted sign for the Bombay Beach Botanical Garden led us to a larger-than-life-size ceramic flower “skeleton” created by L.A. artist

Yassi Mazandi. A block away, at the Hermitage Museum, another L.A.-based artist, Greg Haberny, mounted an exhibition titled *Why Do I Destroy Everything I Love?* And across the street, *The Monster That Challenged the World* was screening at the Bombay Beach Drive-In, a graveyard of gutted autos facing forward and rotting like the tilapia on the nearby shore.

For a town widely written off as a post-apocalyptic murk, this place has a spirited community of artists, musicians, philosophers, and at least one polyamorous eccentric. They’re buying up the dilapidated houses and transforming them into cultural attractions for the 300 or so people who live here and many more who visit.

Each spring they host the Bombay Beach Biennale — although they never publicly announce the dates. It’s a

Previous spread: Anya Kants; opposite page: Sarah DeRemer; facing page: Tao Ruspoli

Musicians and merry-makers transform the neighborhood. Opposite page: Yassi Mazandi created the ceramic flower “skeleton” for the Bombay Beach Botanical Garden.

## “THE BOMBAY BEACH BIENNALE IS A PLAYFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH A VERY SERIOUS UNDERCURRENT.”

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carnival of the arts for locals, participants, and a measured number of friends, family, and art-world insiders. The tongue-in-cheek name skewers art biennials like the Whitney in New York and others in Venice and São Paulo.

“Bombay Beach Biennale has wonderful alliteration and absurdity to it,” says Tao Ruspoli, a homeowner and one of the event’s founders. “But it’s not a joke. By playing with these sacred concepts of what constitutes art or a festival, by being irreverent, we honor them both. It’s a playful engagement with a very serious undercurrent.”

At the Bombay Beach Biennale, we’d make do without the glossy catalog, vernissage, and sponsored amenities.

THE SALTON SEA formed in 1905 when engineers trying to increase the flow of water from the Colorado River lost control and overwhelmed irrigation canals for 18 months. The deluge filled the dry ancient lakebed known as the Salton Sink and created California’s largest lake, 35 miles long and 15 miles wide.

It’s easy to imagine the eastern shoreline, with its picturesque backdrop of the far Santa Rosas, lined with million-dollar homes, yacht clubs, exclusive cabanas, and bustling cantinas.





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Abandoning  
all subtlety,  
Olivia Steele  
installed her  
neon sculpture,  
*Save Me*, directly  
on the water  
for the Bombay  
Beach Biennale  
weekend.





Steve Shigley's *Tesseract* offered a visual spectacle, while (below) Giancarlo Neri's *Moontruck* fooled some people into thinking it was the actual moon. Opposite: *The Toy House* by Kenny Scharf is a "permanent" installation.

Someone had this vision when Bombay Beach was incorporated in 1929, and some version of it became reality, at least for a short time, in the 1950s and '60s. Tourists in trailers and motorhomes would travel 170 miles from L.A. to enjoy boat races, water skiing, and sport fishing and to see celebrities such as Sonny Bono, the Beach Boys, Frank Sinatra, and the Marx Brothers.

But as the salinity of the water increased, the sea lost its sparkle, and visitation plummeted. The final blow came from a pair of tropical storms, in 1976 and '77. They washed away the Bombay Beach marina and bars like Luck of the Irish and Barco's and filled the eight-by-five-block town — the lowest community in the United States, at 223 feet below sea level — like a bathtub.

Forty years later, trailers and houses along the shore continue decaying in the mud. The berm where we stood, listening to Feld sing her aria, protects the remaining houses.

The town still has a couple of places to get a burger and a beer — Ski Inn and American Legion Post 801 — as well as a tiny market. But it has no gas station, and the closest supermarket is 40 minutes away. Visitors these days tend to be photographers, filmmakers, and *plein air* painters who come to document the ruins.

"So many things are fascinating and enchanting about

Bombay Beach," says Randy Polumbo, who transformed one of the houses into a "psychedelic human terrarium" called Angler Grove. "The forgotten, forlorn, bedraggled paradise; the tragic and fraught ecology; the tiny, dense community of rugged and colorful individuals who live here; the beautiful light and desert landscape; the incredible dawns and sunsets; and the defiant hope and creative spirit of both the humans and animals that still find a way to make some use of a fouled artificial waterway."

The sea is failing because it has no outlet, and over the years its sources of fresh water have been either cut off or diverted. It probably would have evaporated by now if not for agricultural runoff from the Imperial and Coachella valleys. As the sea shrinks, the high concentration of salt and minerals makes the water unlivable. Only the algae-eating tilapia remain. Fish die-offs leave little food for migrating birds. And when the wind blows just right, a wretched foulness, infused with tiny, toxic particulates, wafts through the manicured resort communities of the Coachella Valley.

As more of the Salton Sea shoreline becomes exposed, the potential for alkaline dust clouds to blow into the valley presents not only an environmental health crisis but an existential threat to tourism, the lifeblood of the region's economy.

This is where the artists come in.

Previous spread: Amanda Vandenberg; this page: Anya Kaats; opposite, from top: Sarah DeRemer; Tao Ruspoli



**"WHEN I GOT  
DIVORCED IN 2011  
THE FIRST THING I  
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A HOUSE IN  
BOMBAY BEACH."**

—TAO RUSPOLI



Revelers in offbeat  
outfits, playing offbeat  
music, marched in the  
biennial parade.

**THE DESERT**  
**DOES HAVE THIS**  
*FEELING RIGHT*  
**NOW OF BEING THE**  
**NEXT FRONTIER**  
*FOR ARTISTS.*





ON OUR WAY into Stefanie Schneider’s exhibition of photographs, appropriately shot on expired and unstable Polaroid film, we found Ruspoli in his element, reveling on a rough edge of civilization. The Joshua Tree-based filmmaker and philosophy addict has been coming to Bombay Beach since 2007, the year he read Kim Stringfellow’s book *Greetings From the Salton Sea*. “I was enthralled with this place. When I got divorced in 2011, the first thing I did was buy a house in Bombay Beach,” says Ruspoli, who incidentally released the feature film *Monogamish* last year.

As his visits grew more frequent, he began to notice the others. “Every time I’d go, I’d see people making videos, taking pictures. Nobody spent the night. They would come and shoot fashion, the beach. And there was nothing in the town to celebrate all the creativity that happens here.”

One of his first Bombay Beach houseguests was L.A. hotelier Stefan Ashkenazy, a friend since they were in the seventh grade. Four years ago, Ashkenazy started a camp at Burning Man where he hosted a black-tie dinner for 100 people, including Susan Sarandon, who Ruspoli recalls had a vial of Timothy Leary’s ashes and put a little in everyone’s drink.

“Stefan is like the ring leader, unapologetic in the extremeness of his vision,” says Ruspoli, who in 2015 invited Ashkenazy, owner of West Hollywood’s Petit Ermitage,

to Bombay Beach for Thanksgiving dinner, along with Johnson & Johnson heiress Lily Johnson White.

“There was a symbiosis between the three of us,” Ruspoli says. A biennial sounded like a wildly creative way to bring attention to the Salton Sea and a measure of culture to a deprived community. “People are hungry for originality and experiences. What would be more interesting and more surreal than bringing art, opera, ballet, and a philosophy conference to Bombay Beach?”

In April 2016 they hosted the first Bombay Beach Biennale. The theme was “Decay,” particularly our attraction to it. The following year it was “The Way the Future Used to Be.” This year was “God’s Silence.”

Ashkenazy collaborated with artists and designers to transform houses and empty lots into the opera house, drive-in theater, Hermitage Museum, Bombay Beach Estates, and The Bombay Beach Beach Club — venues for exhibitions, interventions, performances, and parties.

“The amazing thing is the caliber of people we draw,” Ruspoli says, citing Aileen Getty, who gave a grant; San Francisco Ballet principal dancer Maria Kochetkova, who performed at the Bombay Beach Opera House; L.A. muralist Kenny Scharf, who created the Toy House and painted The Banned Book Library; and a roster of top-tier philosophy professors.



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Previous spread: Anya Kaatz; this page: Jean Karvelli; opposite: Sarah DeRemer



Greg Haberny exhibition at the Hermitage. Opposite: Randy Polubmo’s Angler Grove.

Tickets to this year’s biennial were limited to 500, but the wind forced the registration table from the parking area to the Ski Inn, so many more visitors slipped in without being counted.

“We’re trying to make this for the locals first and for the artists and their close friends,” Ruspoli says. “We don’t have the infrastructure for a mass audience.”

The free-flowing biennial has a loose schedule, with scores of culture-loving merrymakers wandering the neighborhood from morning to night. The events and installations unfold on the beach and at many of the residences, including Danielle Aykroyd’s place, which she calls Pythia, at Third Street and F. The daughter of actor Dan Aykroyd is a poet and musician who performs as Vera Sola. During the biennial, she played at the Ski Inn and The

Bombay Beach Institute of Particle Physics, Metaphysics, and International Relations.

Ruspoli masterminded the institute and runs its program of performances and lectures around the biennial theme. Jessie Ann Owens, distinguished professor emeritus of music at University of California, Davis, delivered a talk about “God’s Silence in Bach’s Matthew Passion,” and a half-dozen philosophy professors stirred lively conversations about a few of life’s timely and perplexing questions.

“One of my big points was the conception of justice in the form of punishment,” says Christia Mercer, a Columbia University philosophy professor and activist who also teaches in prison. She invoked St. Thomas, who had

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suggested that people in heaven revel in the eternal suffering of the damned, for they have sinned. “I’m interested in what people say about life and how they live life. I hope some of the things I said resonate with people.”

Mercer and Oxford professor Mark Wrathall proved that philosophical ideas, presented interactively, grip and transform people like the visual arts, music, and dance. That’s no easy feat.

Polumbo’s trippy Angler Grove, on H Avenue between Third and Fourth streets, is an adult funhouse with a mirrored exterior and large circular window framing a disco ball and an assortment of colorful, blown-glass adornments that look like sex toys. Its soul, we’d learn, runs much deeper than our first impression.

“Reflective surfaces are the ‘mirror’ Narcissus stared into, the window into the soul of introspection, or better yet, the unconscious,” says Polumbo, an artist and master builder who works in New York and Joshua Tree. “I like people making their own experience and connections, but their behavior is most certainly directed, augmented, maybe catalyzed by time in the structure. Walking out, folks are often stirred up, thinking or feeling hard about something. Being present is a gift art and music easily inspire in humans, and encouraging people to do this together in a fun, lighthearted way can inspire anything from whimsical connections to the kind of healing I expect occurs when groups of monks chant.”

Angler Grove, like the institute, drive-in, and several other attractions, is a “gift to the town,” a permanent installation that visitors access by asking the bartender at the Ski Inn.

Many artists installed their work on the beach, on or near E Avenue. The two-story-tall *Tesseract*, a four-dimensional steel and light sculpture by Steve Shigley of Yucca Valley, was one of the most photographed pieces. Three adjacent installations — *Bombay Beach Metro* by Dave Corcoran and Ruspoli, *Salty* by Ray Ewing and Adrian Pijoan, and *El Barco de la Muerte (The Boat of the Dead)* by Sean Guerrero — lead to the Bombay Beach Beach Club, a music venue with yellow-Speedo-clad bartenders and loungers facing the sea.

NOTHING CURBS PROGRESS at the Salton Sea more than the politics surrounding it.

In 2003 the Imperial Irrigation District agreed to transfer a massive amount of water to San Diego County. The deal called for mitigation water at the sea through 2017 and a restoration plan to abate the salinity and its toxic aftermath. When the California Natural Resource Agency delivered that plan four years later, its \$9 billion price tag was a non-starter for lawmakers.

In 2015, Gov. Jerry Brown created the Salton Sea Task Force, which came up with a 10-year, \$383 million plan for habitat restoration in areas where migrating birds once proliferated and for dust suppression on up to 25,000 acres of crusty playa. But little has happened since then.

“We have a plan, we have money, there is additional money lined up, and we have a constituency, myself included, that is running out of patience,” Assembly member Eduardo Garcia said during a May oversight hearing where he pressed for action. “Now we need to move forward and execute mitigation efforts in a timely manner to improve air quality and safeguard human health, as well as the ecological and

economic issues surrounding the sea.”

Some experts say the only way to save the sea is to bring in more water, either from the Colorado River, the Gulf of California, or the Pacific Ocean. But Riverside County Supervisor V. Manuel Perez, whose district includes the Coachella Valley, has proposed the \$400 million North Lake Vision, calling for a barrier wall to preserve the northern shoreline. A new finance district would issue project bonds to be repaid through hotel, property, and sales taxes.

Meanwhile, artists like Berlin-based Olivia Steele, who installed the neon-light piece *Save Me* directly on the water, hope to draw attention to the cause as it gains urgency. Ruspoli agrees. “[The biennial] is about how the arts can affect meaningful change and jolt people out of complacency,” he says.

He has lived in Venice Beach and knows the cycle of artists discovering a place, being drawn to its “freedom and anarchy,” and eventually watching gentrification and displacement set in.

“There’s always this risk that what follows spoils it,” Ruspoli says. “In Bombay Beach, that seems like such an obscure possibility. But the desert does have this feeling right now of being the next frontier for artists: It has its original landscape, it’s still affordable to artists, and there’s opportunity to engage meaningfully with the geography, weather, people, and history. But that’s a double-edge sword.”

BACK ON THE BERM, Giancarlo Neri’s sculpture *Moontruck* fools the people who look at it from the neighborhood side, where it appears to be the actual moons rising. But Neri himself was nowhere in sight.

Adam Freeland, the English DJ, musician, record producer, and newly minted High Desert resident, had enlisted Neri for the biennial, but authorities at LAX turned away the Italian artist because of a 1995 marijuana arrest in New York City.

“His non-arrival became the premise of this other work of art,” Freeland says, referring to stickers placed around town with the words “Where’s Neri?” The artist wrote an essay about his troubles in New York and at LAX that biennial visitors could read at the institute.

The stickers add a layer to the Bombay Beach narrative and symbolize the far-reaching interest in the Salton Sea. “I would like to see the biennial grow organically,” Ruspoli says. “I’d like to see the town become a place of intellectual discourse — de-emphasize the weekend and go more toward screenings at the drive-in, maybe a film fest, exhibitions at the Hermitage Museum, and shows at the opera house.

“Opera singers should wear a performance at Bombay Beach as a badge of honor.”

Likewise, Ashkenazy envisions black-tie movie premieres at the drive-in, but his most dramatic addition to the town will be The Last Resort, a five-room (“maybe more”) hotel built with shipping containers that “play with guests in a way you couldn’t in any other environment,” Ashkenazy says. “My big joy in life is the opportunity to guide everyone’s senses and their emotions with fragrance and textures.”

Sonny Bono was the last great advocate for the sea, and no public figure has stepped forward to replace him. Now artists want to fill that void.

“Because of the art, people are talking about a place that was long forgotten,” says Mazandi, who created the ceramic flower skeleton.

The question now is, who’s listening? ■