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# Noah in the Desert

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Photograph by Volker M. Welter

## by Volker M. Welter

Cruising in an easterly direction on the southern California Highway 62 takes you just north of the Interstate 10 into the Mojave Desert. The smallish settlements along that route are pragmatically named after the dominating features of the landscape: Whitewater, Morongo Valley, Yucca Valley, Joshua Tree, and, finally, Twenty-Nine Palms, home to one of the largest military bases in the U.S. With the road gradually climbing higher, this area is called the “high desert”. It is characterized by incredible rock formations, limitless blue skies, myriads of brown hues of the land, and mostly low-growing, spotty vegetation. One exception is the Joshua tree, a variation of the Yucca palm that grows to tree-like heights, apparently for up to 150 years, before it dies away. The tree achieved fame in the 1980s when the Irish rock band U2 named an album after it. In Southern California, however, Joshua Tree connotes first of all a small desert community attractive to artists and hippies, New Age hopefuls, and all those for whom geographic isolation or solitude by choice opens up possibilities unachievable elsewhere.

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Along the way, one passes the *Institute of Mentalphysics*, a mid-twentieth-century outpost of eternal Tibetan wisdom established by a British geographer on a campus erected above an assumed crossing of sacred lines. Many of the buildings were designed by no other than Frank Lloyd Wright and his son Lloyd Wright. Or, a little north from this 'holy' site, one can indulge mind and body in a sound bath in the *Integraton*. This institution combines underneath its 1950s domed and daring plywood structure a convoluted history involving, for example, a German World War I U-Boat pilot living underneath a humongous boulder; post-Second World War UFO conventions attended by thousands of UFO fans (so at least states the website); and, more recently, a set of crystal bowls filling the domed space with sounds that make one's soul platonically reverberate with the cosmos.



*From the Point of View of the Little People*, Noah Purifoy, 1994. Photograph by Susan Haller.

Again a little further away, in the small, unincorporated community of Joshua Tree, Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Museum is another alternative desert site. This one was born, however, not so much out of a pseudo-spiritual longing, but from the desire of an artist for an environment to realise his vision. Purifoy moved to Joshua Tree in the 1980s. Before that, he had spent many decades in Los Angeles, moving back and forth between being a practising artist, an interior designer and a social worker. Ultimately, Purifoy found artistic peace in the desert. When he passed away in 2004, the artist had transformed a ten-acre large desert lot into an outdoor art park with over one hundred art pieces and sculptures, mostly assembled from junk and trash. His life work, which is nowadays tended to by the Noah Purifoy Foundation, was just honoured with a large exhibition shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The two exhibition curators, Yael Lipschutz and Franklin Sirmans, also just published *Noah Purifoy Junk Dada*, the first monograph on the artist.

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At first sight, Joshua Tree is about as undistinguished as many other small towns in California. State Route 62 runs right through it and constitutes the main street with assorted small stores, post office, trading posts, coffee shops, and art galleries on either side. The beauty of Joshua Tree is its setting, the views it offers across the desert, and, of course, the nearby Joshua Tree National Park with its uniquely shaped rocks and rare plant specimen.

The small community is also a centre of California's existing hippie and new age culture and their never-ending stream of young followers. Admittedly, counter culture has come of age, but plant yourself on the terrace of the *Natural Sisters Cafe* in town and conversations of guests, casually overheard, will put you back decades: "What are you doing for the Holidays?" "I am still thinking of going to the Grateful Dead concert; if it wasn't so expensive." Apparently, the oldies were performing under their new name *Dead & Company* in Los Angeles at the end of 2015. A little bit further down the road, the weekly farmer's market attracts locals and visitors alike. Among the preferred items of clothing on the day of my visit were high-heeled shoes, over-sized baskets, puffy pairs of trousers for men recalling the once popular, supposedly Oriental dresses – though wooden bead necklaces with a portrait of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh were not to be seen, tough leather jackets, and hi-tech hiking boots. Dreadlocks united both sexes beyond all gender distinctions.



*The Kirby Express* (detail view), Noah Purifoy, 1995-6. Photograph by Susan Haller.

Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Museum lies on the outskirts of Joshua Tree. Take Sunburst Avenue off the main drag, follow it and then Golden Street, Border Avenue, and Aberdeen Drive across a few more junctions and around a few more bends until the tarmac of the road turns into sand. Keep driving, and you eventually reach what looks like the suburban fringe of Joshua Tree. The site is to your left; no fence keeps you out, no entrance pavilion lets you in. Only a gate made from retired tires and

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lettering that, if conventionally arranged, would spell out the word “Welcome” indicates that you have reached your destination. You can enter, however, by just walking around the gate. The museum keeps its distance to both, the artsy downtown of Joshua Tree and, at least physically, the frenetic art scene of Los Angeles. Yet the experiences Purifoy made while living and working in Southern California’s metropolis were still with him when he arrived in the desert late in his life.

Purifoy was born in Snowhill, Alabama, in 1917. During the Second World War he served with the U.S. Navy Construction Battalion in the South Pacific. Like the rest of the military and most of the nation, the Seabees, as the battalion is also known, were segregated. After the war, Purifoy studied at Atlanta University, Georgia, for a degree in social work. Two years later, he became an art student at the Chouinard Art Institute in downtown Los Angeles. The school had been founded in 1921 by artist Ms. Nelbert Murphy Chouinard, and it merged in 1961 with the L. A. Conservatory of Music to form the California Institute of Art. Ed Ruscha is a prominent alumnus of the Chouinard Art Institute, though as of this writing Purifoy’s name was not included in a list of alumni on the school’s website.

Artistically, Purifoy came of age when in August 1965 the Watts riots broke out after a black motorist had been arrested for drunk driving. The traffic stop and an ensuing confrontation between the arresting officer, the driver, friends and family quickly escalated into six days of extreme violence. From August 11 to 17, a large number of the black citizens of eastern Los Angeles looted and burned businesses and private property in the city’s Watts neighbourhood in protest against racist and discriminatory treatment by, for example, the police forces. Once the riots had subsided, Purifoy wandered the destroyed streets collecting pieces of debris, burned junk, and other leftovers of the urban mayhem. So did some of his artist friends, and together they mounted the “66 Signs of Neon” junk art exhibition. The exhibition was first shown in the following year at an arts festival that commemorated famous Watts’ citizen Simon Rodia who had passed away in 1965.

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*Squatter's Shack*, Noah Purifoy, 1989. Photograph by Susan Haller.

Rodia was an Italian construction worker and mason who had immigrated to the United States. In Los Angeles, especially in the Watts neighbourhood, he was widely known as the creator of the Watts Towers. These towers are filigree, reinforced concrete structures that Rodia had begun raising in 1921, but stopped working on in the mid-1950s because of his age; Rodia was by then approaching his eighties. By that time, however, he had entirely covered the basket-like structures of the slender, cone-shaped towers with broken tiles, glass, and other colourful materials mainly obtained by sifting through urban trash and recycling abandoned rubble. Subsequent to Rodia's death, the towers eventually became part of the Watts Towers Art Centre, an institution that Purifoy had co-founded the year before the riots.

Noah Purifoy was seventy-two years old when he relocated from Los Angeles, on August 1, 1989, to the desert. There he lived and worked on land owned by a friend and sometime lover. Whatever ultimately triggered his move, Purifoy brought with him the experiences and memories of his life in the American South, Southern California, and Los Angeles; all of which he would draw on during his coming building project. From his time by the Seabees, Purifoy was familiar with speedy and uncomplicated building methods such as those used to erect Quonset huts. The Watts Towers had opened up his eyes to public art build by so-called "outsider artists", and his work for the art centre allowed him to combine for the benefit of the community his interest in making art with his social worker expertise. Nobody had to tell Purifoy about racial discrimination. That art could, perhaps, help to overcome the results of riots instigated by racism and its consequences, Purifoy and his artists-colleagues had begun exploring when they created for "66 Signs of Neon" a new environment out of the debris of the old. But living now on the fringes of the metropolis and of the

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small town, Purifoy gained the twofold freedom of space and silence; two realms awaiting to be filled with his art.

One recurrent theme in many of the art pieces that Purifoy created during the last two decades of his long life is the enclosure of space. Everywhere in the outdoor museum one finds traces of human abodes, often open to the sky and the elements, reduced to their structural frames, covered with sheets of plywood or corrugated metal as if temporarily re-inhabited, or blackened as if charred by fire. This motif may hark back to the destruction Purifoy saw in the aftermath of the Watts riots, but it also reflect the artist's interest in continental European philosophers such as Heidegger or Bachelard, pondering about what it meant to be at home.

Even more elementary than the search for the human abode was for Purifoy the quest to cover surfaces—including the desert sand—by adding a second or more layers of materials to vertical and horizontal surfaces. This second skin Purifoy preferably made from small-size materials like broken glass, cut-up plastic, or even folded paper. Nailed, screwed, and glued to ground and background, all efforts by Purifoy, however, to mark the territory will still be in vain. The desert climate and the flimsiness of the materials conspire to ensure that these lovingly created surfaces will wither and weather away. Until then, however, they speak to the artist's sense of beauty and his never-ending joy in beautifying his own creations and the small part of the world he occupied.

Oscillating between images of beauty and destruction, the many traces of the human body Purifoy integrated into his art works across the sculpture park, seemingly tip the balance toward the latter. The human body appears restraint in tight frames, cut in half and lifted up or hung from bridge-like structures—on closer inspection some of those hanging objects turn out to be roots—or just fallen to the ground. Pieces that are identified as "Gallows"; spaces empty of humans like a lecture hall and a small theatre, and an abundance of discarded human clothing reinforce the impression that violence against man has thrown a long shadow over some if not all of the art works. Other pieces, however, exude a more consolatory mood: Three elongated crosses, for example, pierce the desert sky as if Purifoy wanted to recall Golgotha or Calvary, the traditional Christian site of suffering and redemption.

Then there is the sound that fills the outdoor space once the desert winds set in later in the afternoons. Wires begin to vibrate, clothes and papers to rustle, wood, plastic, and metal to scratch and jostle against their fixtures, wooden frames to ache, and mattress springs to creak. The longer one wanders around the site, listening to the random sounds—are they really random?—one realises that Purifoy created not just art pieces to look at, but an environment that works visually, spatially, as much as aurally. Perhaps it is true after all that sounds in the desert make your soul swing in tune with the universe.

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**About the Author:**



Volker M. Welter is an architectural historian who has lived, studied, and worked in Germany, Scotland and England and is now a Professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB), where he teaches Californian and European modern architectural history and theory. His publications include *Biopolis-Patrick Geddes and the City of Life* (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 2002), *Ernst L. Freud, Architect: The Case of the Modern Bourgois Home* (Oxford/New York: Berghahn, 2012), and articles in such journals such as *Cabinet, Israel Studies, Manifest*, and *Oxford Art Journal.* He is currently completing a book entitled *Tremaine Houses: A Study in mid-twentieth-century Patronage of Modern American Architecture*.

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