

IN
SEARCH
OF
BEAUTY

COACHELLA VALLEY NATIVE
PHILLIP K. SMITH III
TAKES US BEHIND THE
SCENES OF HIS DESERT X
INSTALLATION AHEAD OF ITS
FEB. 25 DEBUT.

WORDS BY KRISTIN SCHARKEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LANCE GERBER

Phillip K. Smith III has been described as a magician, but that doesn't seem like the most accurate term. After an afternoon with the artist at his Palm Desert studio, I'm impressed by his meticulousness, his focus. Smith speaks about his work like a mathematician talks about equations. When we stand in front of *Crease*, a painted fiberglass piece, he explains that the geometry of its five lines allows the viewer to understand how light is moving. Smith wants his work to be like the clouds, he says. Everyone accepts them as beautiful, but we don't always wrap our minds around why.

"I'm interested in an idea of universal beauty," Smith says. "Of something that, like the sunset or the clouds, forces all of us as human beings to stop, no matter what our background is, no matter where we are – that experience of being on the edge of the Grand Canyon or seeing that ray of light coming through the clouds. ... I think that the art world is a bit leery of the word 'beauty' because, how can beauty be universal? It's so much in the eye of the beholder. But I would argue that it's not. I think there's actually something that can be tapped into, that rises above all of that, that is a universal sense of beauty and sense of awe that makes us all want to stop and look."

His studio is two stories, with white-washed walls punctuated by various pieces including the concentric circles housed in *Portals*, an installation at last year's Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival. Each is a blank canvas for an infinite number of LED-powered light "paintings" that blur through an ever-changing spectrum of color. Their glow reflects off his black-rimmed glasses as he smiles and points to a patch of gray hair on the side of his head. He earned it during the installation, he explains, then points to a patch on the other side and credits his 2014 festival piece, *Reflection Field*. Will he show work at this year's Coachella? No, he says. He doesn't want a gray stripe down the middle.

Born and raised in the Coachella Valley, Smith rose to international acclaim in late 2013 after his Joshua Tree light installation, *Lucid Stead*, dazzled viewers across the world. Mirrors on a homestead shack reflected the desert landscape by day and radiated his now patented color-sequencing program by night. It was a piece that harnessed the pace of change in the desert, an optical illusion now included in Henry M. Sayre's textbook "A World of Art" that earned Smith comparisons to

James Turrell, Robert Irwin and Kenneth Noland. This month, the artist will head back into the local landscape to unveil his latest installation: *The Circle of Land and Sky*. It debuts Feb. 25 at Desert Biennial's inaugural Desert X exhibition, a series of site-specific work by international artists across the Coachella Valley.

Open dusk until dawn, the piece will be constructed within a plot of raw desert on the corner of Portola Avenue and Frank Sinatra Drive in Palm Desert, and comprise a perfect circle – 165 feet in diameter – made up of 300 mirror-polished poles placed 22 inches apart and angled at 10 degrees. As visitors approach, all that will be reflected is the untouched landscape; but stand at the center, and all you'll see are individual samplings of the vast, open sky.

"For *Lucid Stead* and this piece, it is all about connecting with the desert and the pace of change that's happening," Smith explains. "What I was really happy about with *Lucid Stead* was that people's natural reaction was to whisper as they approached it and walked around it – the sense that the piece had somehow made this space of the desert sacred, and that it was important

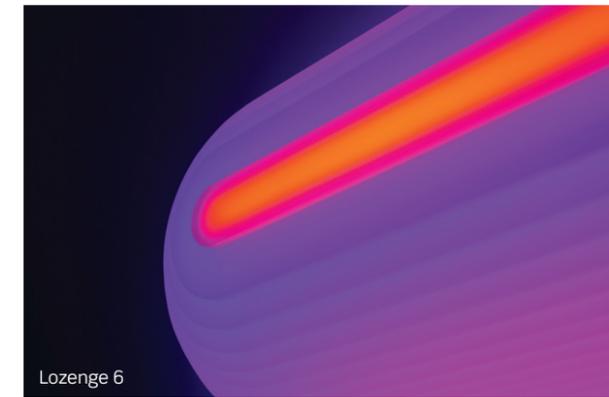
and therefore, needed to be respected and needed to be taken in. You needed to spend time with it. Some people were there for half an hour, some people were there for five hours or beyond. Some people came back 10 times. I hope that same thing happens here."

We visit the Palm Desert plot the day after my studio tour, and Smith's eyes light up when I ask about the Los Angeles Lakers license plate on his car. He still has his leather jacket from the Showtime era, he says with a grin, before turning back to install a mirrored pole in the ground. It's a slow process to anchor each post into the dirt, then coordinate a pair of levelers to angle it at exactly 10 degrees. The sun glints off Smith's glasses as he explains how he'll take his time with this installation – a lesson learned after constructing a similar piece in Laguna Beach.

Made of identical mirrored poles, *¼ Mile Arc* reflected downtown Laguna on one side and the ocean on the other, allowing for a free flow of movement down the sand. While in dialogue, these two pieces differ in terms of their geometry: One follows the undulations of the coast; the other creates a distinct space within the desert's expanse.



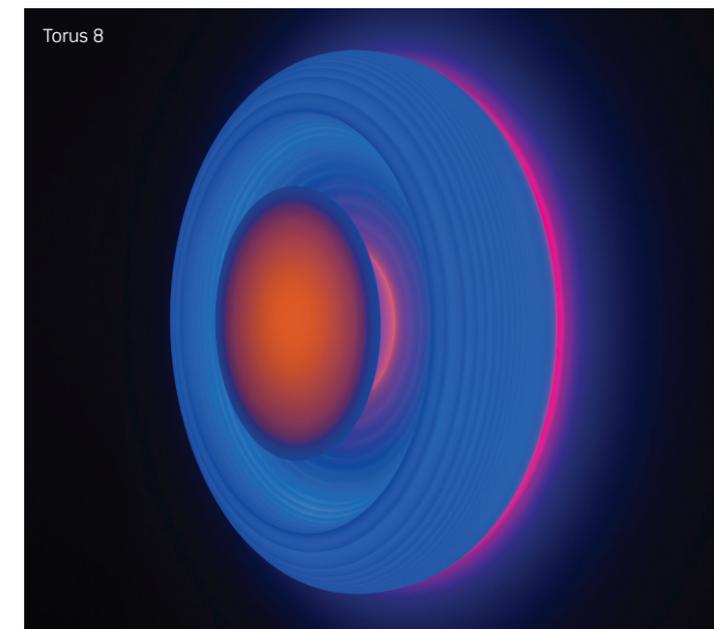
¼ Mile Arc



Lozenge 6



Reflection Field



Torus 8

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Lucid Stead

“The circular reality allows the eye to continue to revolve around that space,” Smith explains of his Desert X piece. You’re not getting caught up on corners or stoppage points.”

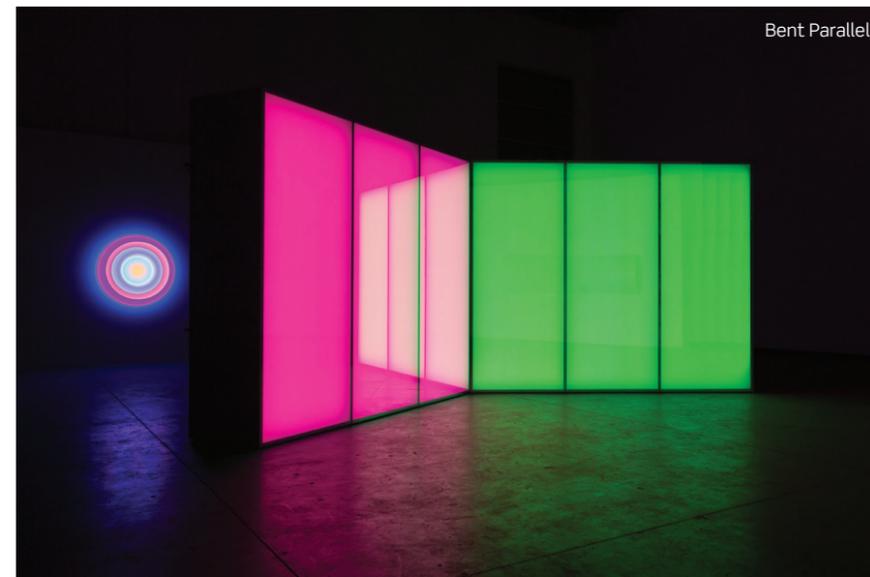
The circle serves as a “welcome mat” due to the universal language of geometry. Plus, the stepped formation removes transitions and creates “hiccups” that “allow us as humans to actually understand what’s going on,” he says. It’s important to Smith that all viewers be able to access his work, a desire stemming from his time earning undergraduate degrees in architecture and fine arts from Rhode Island School of Design, and the subsequent five years he spent working on the East Coast.

“Being in college and going to New York City, [I was] seeing work that was obviously well made and carefully thought out but that didn’t give me any kind of way in,” Smith explains. “I could appreciate it from a certain standpoint but I knew I was missing tons of it. It was almost like opening up someone’s diary on a page

and not knowing the 200 pages prior and how we got there. That really affected me. I really wanted everyone that looked at my work to be able to have a way in, so that no matter what your level of intelligence, experience, desire, whatever it is, that you have an opportunity to have your own unique experience with this work.”

In earlier pieces, Smith was even cognizant of colors that didn’t “have any kind of baggage,” like the red-orange shade similar to the Golden Gate Bridge’s iconic International Orange that he used in Inhale/Exhale, a 55-foot fiberglass sculpture made up of equilateral triangles at the University of La Verne.

And while geometrical transformation can provide a “way in” to Smith’s work, it is often also rooted in opposing forces of light and shadow. Built into a mirror, for example, are the inherent realities of dark and light. If not baggage, there is the acceptance of tension. In The Circle of Land and Sky, your experience will depend on what time you arrive.



Bent Parallel

“Everyone has their own desire for comprehension and experience,” Smith says. “People will come for half an hour and some people will stay for five hours to watch the shadows converge into a black arc. There will be people that will come at 5 a.m. to see dawn and will be there at 7:30 for dusk.

“You’re looking at this blade of reflection that you know is behind you but it’s almost [like], ‘Am I looking at that? Am I looking at what’s in between? Is what’s in between behind me?’” Smith adds. “There’s an ambiguous reality to your perception that happens. I think that’s the question of, ‘Does beauty exist between these opposing forces?’ I’m trying to allow your brain to exist in between. Or to freely oscillate back and forth. ... I like that blurred reality.”

It’s fitting, then, that Smith uses an utterly unforgiving material – light – to capture moments of purity in the world. Perhaps he isn’t as much a magician as he is a true, unadulterated *believer*. God knows the Lakers need some these days.

Back on that afternoon when we walk through his studio, Smith leads me down a hallway covered in portraits of projects that have been and will be. Works viewed by hundreds of thousands at music festivals and in museums. But a trio of renderings in their midst has not yet been seen: three large-scale portals immersing viewers in suspended, reflective spaces. Spanning the Mojave Desert, Golden Gate Park and Midwest flatlands, they were an exercise in Smith’s ability to scale his ambition – a 2014 commission with no budget that ultimately fell through. But the images stay posted, a reminder of what is possible, what lies ahead. Completing these designs with neither financial constraints nor geographic boundaries didn’t change Smith’s perspective on his process. It simply affirmed what he and his studio already do.

“I started in architecture and now I’m almost reconnecting them in a way,” Smith says. “I want to continue to work at the scale of architecture. People often say, ‘This doesn’t look like an artist’s studio. It looks like an architect’s office.’ Well, it kind of is but it kind of isn’t. That’s what I think the next chapter holds for me.”

The pieces epitomize the direction that Smith is heading towards: an exclusive focus on large-scale public experiences, similar to the career of Christo and his late partner, Jeanne-Claude. Through the marriage of his own art and architecture, Smith seeks to capture universal beauty to “unite human beings.” It’s a full-circle harnessing of change and its potential. Merging dichotomies to touch the clouds. 🌱

Editor’s Note: To learn more about Phillip K. Smith III’s other work, read the online version of this story at desertsun.com/desertmagazine.

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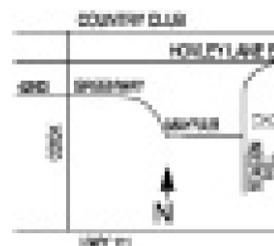
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