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here's a mural in north Palm Springs that stops me each time I pass it. On the side of appraiser Kevin Stewart's now-shuttered gallery, the 30-foot piece by James Haunt and ZES (MSK/Seventh Letter) swirls with bright blues, yellows and oranges – depicting a gray-faced woman whose portrait is sliced by sharp angles of paint. I've always been struck by her bold, white brows and red-rimmed glasses – the way the yellow lens over her left eye seems to drip onto her cheekbone. But I've never grasped any sort of meaning.

Her portrait welcomes visitors into Palm Springs, a beacon of neon as you drive down 111. I remember being shocked, but also encouraged, by her presence when I first drove into the desert looking for an apartment last spring. Though the medium is urban, for me her face represents the tropical, modern vibe of the city. It's a totally different feel than the aesthetic emerging from, say, the east Coachella Valley.

There are distinct divides that exist between our cities. As the art world turns its eye toward the local landscape for Desert X, we seek to explore the nooks and crannies of that tension. This issue spans fashion inspired by the walls and sculptures of Palm Springs, the paintings of a legally blind artist in Desert Edge, and the unsung – and somewhat unsuspecting – arts patron who has provided a platform for young, emerging artists in Indio, Coachella and more: Sarah Scheideman.

I emailed Haunt to ask about his inspiration behind the mural but never heard back. I'm kind of glad I didn't. These days, I'm not sure we need to fully understand a piece of art to appreciate its nuances. I don't see myself in the woman who is depicted, but I do see an artist with something to say. Empathy comes when we can see the world through another. That seems to matter now, more than ever.

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