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Inland Empire Artists Capture the Sense of 'Being Here'

Evan Senn



Walking up the repurposed bank that now exists as [Andi Campognone Projects](#) in downtown Pomona—passing the ominous and creaky glass doors, something evocative and huge comes into view, just past the title wall; it's a large photograph of a very banal-looking building. It sits calmly, unmoving. The colors are muted, and the building seems eerily familiar. Perhaps it is a restaurant of some kind, with lights on inside, and a gaggle of balloons tied to a newspaper dispenser outside its front door. The signage is mysterious and doesn't allude to the inner-workings at all. The inference of humanity is put upon this seemingly empty place, but no human activity is recorded. Next to it is another seemingly abandoned building, a beautiful and forgotten gas station, with a style that suggests the visual kinesis of art deco, which now has become dilapidated and calm. The composition demands a long stare from a viewer; these gorgeous and empty photographs only hint at humanity, and seem to act as more of a relic of our presence.

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Work by Naida Osline, Lewis deSoto, Sant Khalsa, Robert Flick Tony Maher, Julie Shafer and Thomas McGovern all show these banal yet intriguing parts of the IE -- from a variety of perspectives, but composed in such a way you can't help but feel a narrative aspect, a human presence left lingering in details, full of intrigue. The photographic works in the exhibition developed from each artist's creative impulse to visually articulate their independent experience of being here.



"Untitled (91)" by Amir Zaki | Photo: Courtesy of Andi Campognone Projects.

The Inland Empire was one of the first areas settlers flocked to during the California Gold Rush, as it was a luscious and supple green valley area, with a natural water source running through the heart of it -- the Santa Ana River. The wide expanse of the Inland Empire became home to hundreds of thousands, just 50 miles east of the metropolis of Los Angeles, this area had the convenience of being close enough to the major cities of the area, without losing that quiet and spacious attraction that the area was known for. Nowadays, the same rings true. The difference is that somehow over the years, some people started regarding the IE as a wasteful area of nothing. Abandoned homes, buildings, garbage -- even the Federal and State government treated the IE like it was a wasteland. Even though the luscious green valley is now more of a boulder bed of mountains and desert, the IE is still one of the few places in California that has a natural water supply -- the only problem is that now, instead of benefiting our own areas, it is pumped into other cities and areas that do not have a natural water source.



"Self Portrait with the Santa Ana River" by Sant Khalsa.

The nine artists included in the exhibition, "Being Here" are all local artists -- either they were born in the IE, work in the IE or spent time growing into themselves in the IE. These artists are touched or impacted by their location, and in "Being Here", they are able to express their emotive inspiration about the IE.

"Each of their creative works provide us with a unique view and perspective of life in the IE, a place close enough to Los Angeles to have the advantages and challenges of a major urban environment yet still a sufficient distance away to develop its own individual character and identity," says curator Sant Khalsa.

Douglas McCulloh's piece in the exhibition is a giant wall piece; an abstract composition that is comprised of over one hundred images that come up in Google when searched for "Inland Empire." McCulloh uses our contemporary technology and modern-day reliance on machines as a means to create a truly contemporary reflection of what people think of when they think of the Inland Empire. "Who needs a camera when Flickr adds 46 million images per month and Facebook serves 1.2 million images per second? The online image world provides deeply layered, remarkably resonant views of every subject imaginable--every place, every culture, every object, every idea," says McCulloh.



"Being Here" Installation Shot, Douglas McCulloh, Lewis deSoto, Julie Shafer | Image: Courtesy of Andi Campognone Projects.

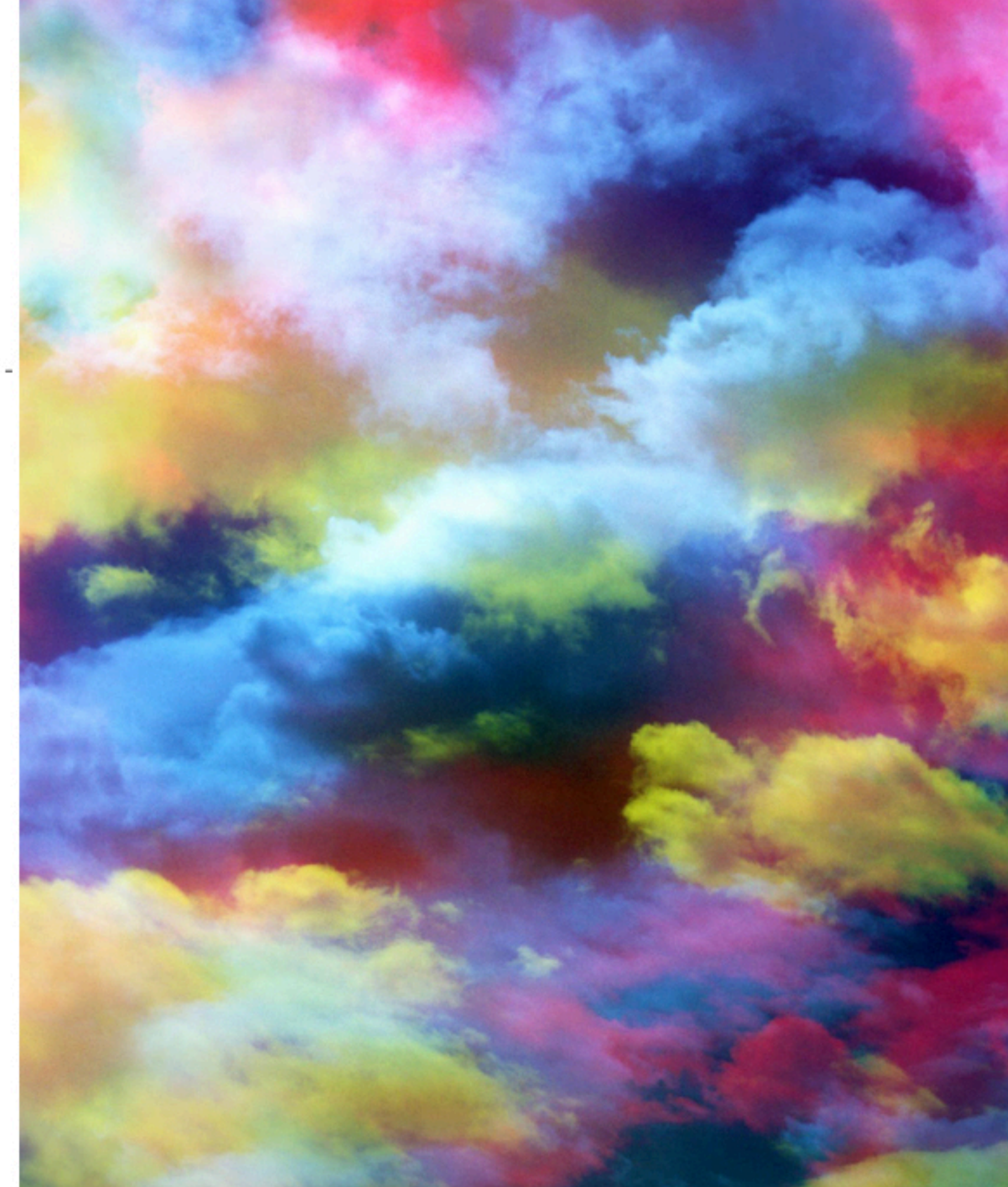


"Being Here" Installation Shot, Thomas McGovern and Amir Zaki | Image: Courtesy of Andi Campognone Projects.

Based on an idea by Sol LeWitt, "The idea is a machine that makes the art," McCulloh not only informs the viewers of the stigmatization of the IE, but also reminds the viewer of the insane reliance on digital media-technology, and helps to reinforce the gap between reality and media.

Just next to the giant Google search, Lewis deSoto's *Agua Mansa*, meaning "Gentle Water," shows an entire wall of a perfectly photographed image of the car-sea in the ghost town of Agua Mansa, only the cemetery remains, it once was the largest settlements in San Bernardino County. deSoto's photograph is 24" by 128," and every inch of the photograph is a 300 dpi version of that inch, giving every single part of the image a complete and infocus attentive quality. All of this area is important to deSoto--he relates this artwork to a sea of water, of rising and disassembly of nature. This sea of cars and car parts not only reflects a relic-graveyard of human manufacturing and excess, but in this ghost town, this is their sprawling sea, unmoving, unchanging, with a slight and distant sound of crows and a rush of water through the Santa Ana river reeds.

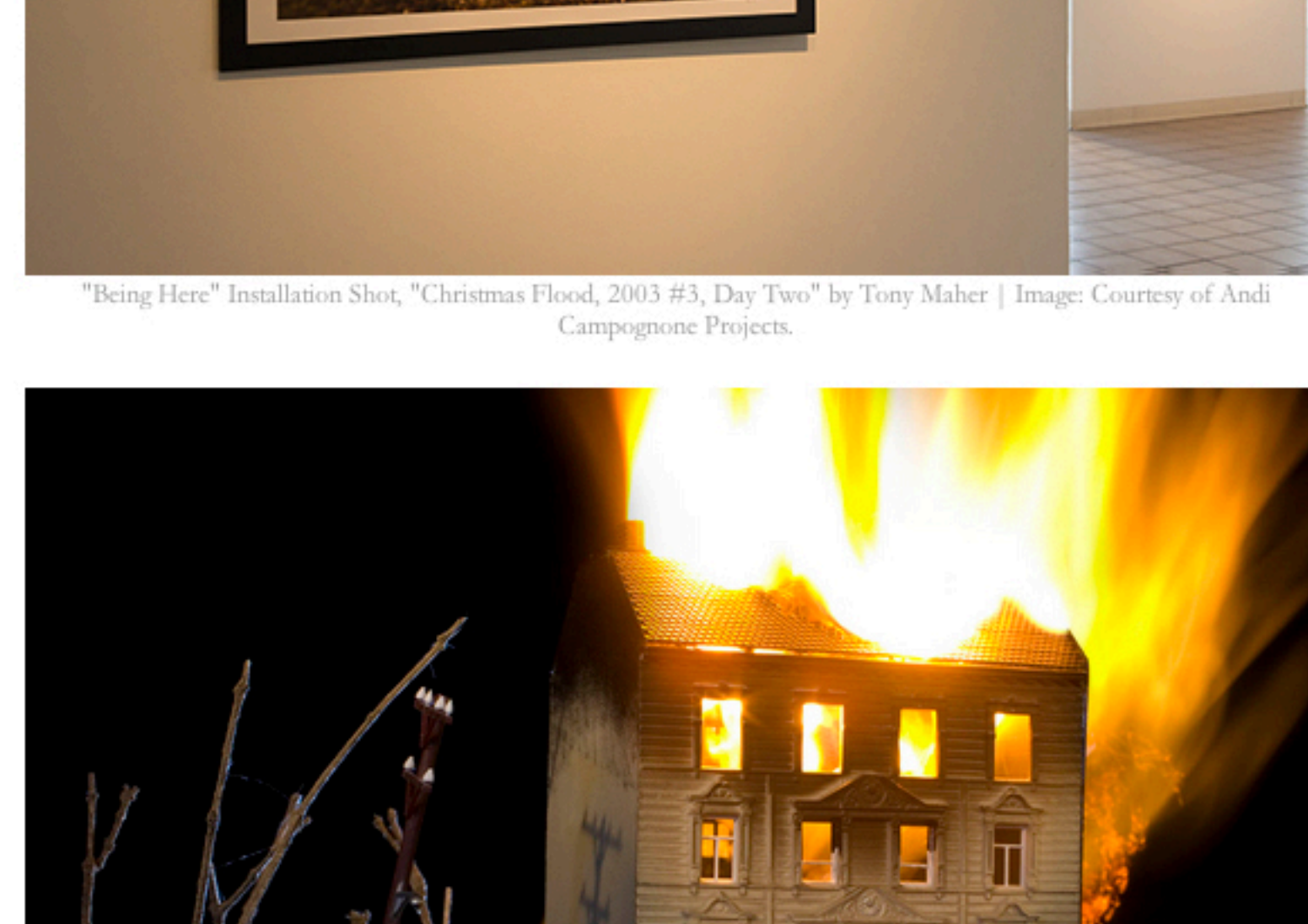
Naida Osline hones in on another important aspect of the experience of being here in the IE, the psychedelic magic of the desert. Many great artists, writers and musicians have found peace as well as inspiration in the transcendental desert experiences. Whether it is mind and body-altering or just imaginative, the IE desert lands give way to incredible creativity. "The local sky is a constant concern for me," he says Osline. "I have been acutely aware of the air pollution, since moving to Riverside in 2010, and obsessively check the air quality for times that it is safe to go outside and take a deep breath. The air quality in the Inland Empire is alarmingly bad and the most damaging pollution for our health is that which is invisible--fine particulate matter. In essence, the sky where I live is both beautiful and toxic."



"Backyard High No. 2" by Naida Osline (Image: Courtesy of Andi Campognone Projects)



"Being Here" Installation Shot, "Christmas Flood, 2003 #3, Day Two" by Tony Maher | Image: Courtesy of Andi Campognone Projects.



"Sunset Hotel Fire" by Tony Maher. (Image courtesy of Andi Campognone Projects)

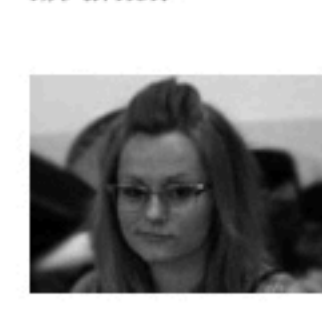
Tony Maher utilizes staged photography with hand made diorama-style scenes of real life events that took place in the IE, the Sunset Hotel Fire from 2002. Maher's photographic practice is obsessively drawn to the concept of memory. Photographs, like the sense of smell, have been magic to evoke memories in viewers/smellers. The objectification of a life event has the capability of recalling more than just the event itself, and Maher plays on that. His works "deal with the issues of remembrance and the representation of locations in my past, from childhood to adult," he says. "The models I create and then photograph become simulacra for the places I once lived, visited or simply hung out. They tend to offer more than the recreation of the original experience as well, often conjuring up more than just the one original memory of that specific life experience."

Each of the artists in this exhibition bring a totally different view on their amorous ideas of what this land holds. "Being Here" has little to no reference of the human figure in the works, but the impressions and relics of imprinted humanity on the environment is notable and intriguing. The artists involved are esteemed photographers in our contemporary SoCal art scene, and the exhibition may be expanded on later next year, but this well-rounded portrait of an underrepresented area is thought provoking and insightful, without people or words to help. An honest observation of the reality of this area results in the creation of highly conceptual and beautifully captured systems of relating to their environment.

"Being Here" at [Andi Campognone Projects](#), 300 W. 2nd Street, Pomona. . Through April 27. Admission is free.

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Top Image: "Self Portrait with displaced Santa Ana River Rock" by Sant Khalsa | Image courtesy of the artist.



About the Author

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