

GAGOSIAN



Sterling Ruby's 'SPECTER' Is So Bright, Even Your iPhone Can't Properly Capture It

At the 2019 Desert X biennial, this fluorescent sculpture reflects the sheer escarpment of San Jacinto Peak.

Haley Mellin



Photo by Lance Gerber. Courtesy of Sterling Ruby Studio.

When first approaching Sterling Ruby's fluorescent monolith, SPECTER, it appears as a desert apparition, a giant glowing orange box positioned in the middle of the landscape. Located in Whitewater, California, positioned between I-10 and a swath of open range mountains of Mount San Jacinto State Park, the structure, which is part of the 2019 Desert X biennial, is composed of a long rectangle of painted aluminum with a scale considerably taller than a standing human at a measurement of 96 x 240 x 96 inches. On the work's radioactive hue in the midst of the desert, artist Ashley Bickerton mused, "acid colors are the ultimate in human signage, that safety orange."

"As a form, SPECTER clearly refers to the object intelligence of HAL in Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey or John McCracken's "Finish Fetish" planks as well as being a cipher or stand-in for more familiar structures such as a shipping container, military bunker or storage unit," offered Desert X 2019 artistic director Neville Wakefield. The Kubrick film was

completed in 1968, during the tail end of minimalism, both references extant in the work. Wakefield continued: "But it's as an encounter in the desert that its mystery comes alive. Here the glowing orange acts as a giant redaction, a pictorial hole burnt into the landscape that transforms the familiar into something strange and surreal."



Photo by Robert Wedemeyer. Courtesy of Sterling Ruby Studio.

On the freeway side of the work, there is a heavily-used track for freight trains, which had a long cargo train passing as I viewed the sculpture. On the other side of the work is a close mountain range and the San Jacinto Peak. I wondered what Specter looks like from the peak, as it is surely visible from the top of the 10,000-foot mountain that naturalist John Muir once called "the most sublime spectacle to be found anywhere on this earth."

Should a visitor to SPECTER at Desert X have the time, there is a famous Cactus to Clouds Trail which would support another perspective of the Ruby. The trail involves an arduous climb of approximately 10,700 feet from the desert floor to the San Jacinto summit at 10,834 feet which would be a good vantage point to view neon monolith.

Though SPECTER feels natural for a photo op, the object itself resists photography because its paint is of a chroma beyond what most cameras can capture on a digital chromatic scale. The in-person experience of the work is singular and something that evades normative descriptions. While there is a well-known Nadine Gordimer quote, "A desert is a place without expectation," the experience of the Ruby amidst the mountainous desert landscape, fulfilled expectations for art in landscape that I didn't know I had.



Photo by Lance Gerber. Courtesy of Sterling Ruby Studio.

For its second iteration, the geographic range of the biennial has expanded, and engages over 300 square miles of land, equivalent to the size of greater Los Angeles. The Desert X 2019 program is led by Wakefield and curators Amanda Hunt and Matthew Schum, who embraced a wide terrain for the works that extends south from Palm Springs to the Salton Sea and the U.S./ Mexico Border. According to Wakefield, one goal of the current exhibition is to “embrace a range of ecological, environmental, and social issues that have been driving conversations about our role in the Anthropocene,” and the range of artworks fittingly do that.

Sterling Ruby currently has solo exhibitions up at Sprueth Magers, Los Angeles, until March 13; a survey exhibition at the Nasher, Dallas, curated by Nasher Chief Curator, Jed Morse, until April 21; and the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, curated by Jeff Fleming, until March 17, 2019. SPECTER will be on view as part of the Desert X biennial, Coachella Valley, until April 21, 2019.



Photo by Lance Gerber. Courtesy of Sterling Ruby Studio.