

BOMBAY BEACH BIENNALE RAIDERS OF THE

WORDS BY ROBERTO CROCI

RAIDERS OF THE LOST ART



Photo courtesy of Taro Rappelli

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THE LOST ART BOMBAY BEACH



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“Study the past if you would define the future.”
—Confucius

The story of the Salton Sea starts in 1905, when a mistake in calculation by engineers trying to increase the flow of water from the Colorado River caused it to burst its banks, flooding the dry Salton Sink and creating in the process the largest lake in California, 35 miles long, 15 miles wide, and 227 feet below sea level. After the flood, everyone thought the lake was just going to evaporate, but the flooding of the Imperial Valley by the Colorado River kept it alive for years instead, its rising water levels stopped only by the construction of the Hoover Dam in the 1930s.

After that the Salton Sea was fed by fresh water irrigation runoff coming from nearby farms (at the time water in California was abundant), and nobody worried about having farmlands in the desert. The fresh water of the lake started to draw people from Los Angeles, three hours away, followed by developers who came to build a community which was known as the Salton Riviera, the West's Greatest Playground. It was a beautiful place, a garden in the middle of the desert, loved by celebrities from nearby Palm Springs, the likes of the Rat Pack, Frank Sinatra, the Beach Boys, the Marx Brothers, and by tourists from all over the world who came to compete in boat races, water skiing, and sport fishing. Life was good. Business too. New cities and places started to expand, including Salton City, North Shores, Salton Sea Beach, and Bombay Beach—communities that made the lake truly a miracle in the desert. In Salton City alone more than 32,000 residential units were sold between 1958 and 1964.

The crown jewel was the Salton Bay Yacht Club, designed by renowned architect Albert Frey, the mind behind the Palm Springs City Hall, a mid-century octagonal clubhouse with pool, motel, and boat-launching facility, built at the price tag of \$500,000 (and now completely demolished). After the California Department of Fish and Game released thousands of fish into the lake increase the business, Salton Sea became a sport-fishing paradise (and a new destination for migratory birds), and throughout the '50s and '60s it drew more people than most parks in the United States, Yosemite included.

That was then. From that point on, through the years, the good fortune of both lake and its residents gradually started to decline for many reasons. First, because as a man-made lake it had no natural outlet or outflow, both salinity and pollution levels from runoff rose rapidly. Toxic chemicals and pesticides dumped by neighboring agriculture and industry steadily increased, while the water level stayed the same. The situation went from bad to worse during the summer of 1999, when an algae bloom caused by the increased salinity led to the death of 7.6 million tilapia fish from oxygen starvation. Their rotting carcasses on the shores of the sea persisted (and are still visible today), resulting in an overwhelming and unbearable smell that ultimately did the community in. The tourists left and, with them, the majority of the residents, leaving behind houses, empty hotels, and restaurants. This in turn sparked a chain reaction through all the coastal cities, which caused the birth of innumerable

rotten ghost towns. Out of them sprang a new community that today is refusing to let abandoned buildings and polluted landscapes define their future.

NEXT

A dusty, barren shore, a dead pier, rancid water, an eerie glow of the setting sun, a dead shell of a bar, an old pickup truck outside the lonely general store, some trailer homes. This was the scene you would witness there, the dystopian landscape of what was left from the glory of past days. This was Bombay Beach, population 295, and it felt like the end of the world.

FLASH FORWARD to the year 2015, when the first Bombay Beach Biennale was born, founded by filmmaker-photographer Tao Ruspoli, philanthropist Lily Johnson-White, and hotelier and art lover Stefan Ashkenazy, with the purpose of attracting people and helping to save the lake. Forward to where Bombay Beach is enjoying a rebirth of sorts, with an influx of artists and intellectuals who have turned the place into a bohemian playground. Forward to where, for three days every year between March and April, the festival takes over the streets, empty lots, rundown structures, and recently renovated buildings of Bombay Beach. The residents have an active role in the operations, believing that the creative work of a collective of artists, actors, dancers, musicians, and philosophers, exhibiting works of art, participating in conferences, and attending concerts, exhibitions, installations, and performances, CAN MAKE a lasting change to the future of the community. We reached out to Tao, who started coming here in 2007, intrigued by what he calls “the most interesting town in America.”

“More than ten years ago I saw a photo book about Salton Sea, and like many Los Angeles residents, I didn't even know that it existed. For me it was surreal, decadent, rotten, but at the same time this decomposition made it unique and magnetic. I was so intrigued that I decided to buy a house, even when everyone thought I was crazy. At that time there were 200 inhabitants and a single bar, the Ski Inn, still the only place where you meet the residents and be part of the local community. I also realized I wasn't the only one. There were those who came to do fashion shoots or music videos, but when they left, none of them ever spoke of the town or the local people. No one even paid tribute to the place. I wanted to do something, and knowing I have many artist friends, I decided on organizing an art event, not to celebrate the decline of the place, but to pay tribute to the surreal and unnatural, the mix of contradictions, and the beauty of sadness. Even though the desolation of the landscape presents scenes of death and abandonment, the secret flourishing of the arts reminds us of the possibility of rebirth, the potential of that dream. That is how Anno 0-Zero (first edition) was initially conceived—as an experiment. Our crowning achievement for the last Bombay Beach Biennale's edition was the presence, among so many other artists, of Kenny Scharf, followed by the likes of Robert Stivers, Stefanie Schneider, Damian Elwes, Bill Attaway, Camille Scheffer, Thomas Linder, and Vera Sola. There is a social function, a commitment to this place,” says Tao. “The art we bring here must help to nourish the place. When possible, all the creations exhibited during the BBB are donated to the community.

They become part of the permanent collection, which in turn makes a lasting contribution to the landscape and the community. Even if they call it the dying sea because it's running out of time, we want to do justice to the Salton Sea.”

Some of the active locations in BBB are the Opera House, the Hermitage Museum, the movie Drive-In and the Bombay Beach Institute of Particle Physics, Metaphysics, and International Relations, known simply as the Institute. Tours of the Hermitage Museum Bombay Beach, a permanent gift to the town, are available upon request. Just ask at the Ski Inn. Despite the name Biennale, the event (now in its fourth edition) takes place every year. “We called it like that to tease contemporary art. What's more far out from the 'real' Venice Biennale, than this place? This is an anti-establishment experience. The entire event is free of charge. It is not about making money. There is no advertising. There is no marketing. The only agenda is saving the sea and help the locals. We don't want to be like so many desert outsider art festivals, like Burning Man, or Coachella. And if the motto of Burning Man is “Leave no trace,” our spirit is exactly the opposite. We are here to leave a trace.”

Another collaborator involved in the project is artist and director Susanna Della Sala, who is working on a feature doc on Bombay Beach. “It initially started as a short movie,” says Susanna from Bombay Beach, “a little documentary about the Biennale. Then, when I came here, I discovered the place. I met the locals and realized that many of them have extraordinary talents, in all fields, their only differences from established artists is their will to stay out of the

limelight and being free to create what they want. Despite everything that has happened here, the place is full of life, and people have really created a special atmosphere. The true soul of the place is the residents.”

An inspiration for the movie, now in post-production, is the myth of Orpheus. “The project is a journey in the spiritual aspect of nature and art,” says Susanna. “Orpheus represents the artist, but he is also a shaman, deeply connected with the natural world and with the natural cycle of decay and regeneration. Orpheus' journey represents the birth, life, and death of Bombay Beach, and the creation of the Biennale symbolizes its revival.”

The Bombay Beach Biennale is an artistic event and wants to be a prototype to other forgotten communities. This year all the artists participating have to create something inspired by the place. For more info about this year's event: <http://www.bombaybeachbiennale.org/>

FUTURE

The future of Salton Sea is at risk, but its major problem is not surviving the ecosystem adversity, but the threat it poses to human life. Its water is saltier than the ocean, and the soil of its dry seabed is contaminated and creates a toxic dust that is posing public health risks. A lot of the nearby residents, including children, are suffering severe asthma. State authorities announced a plan to restore parts of the lake, but nobody knows if that is ever going to happen. — R.C.

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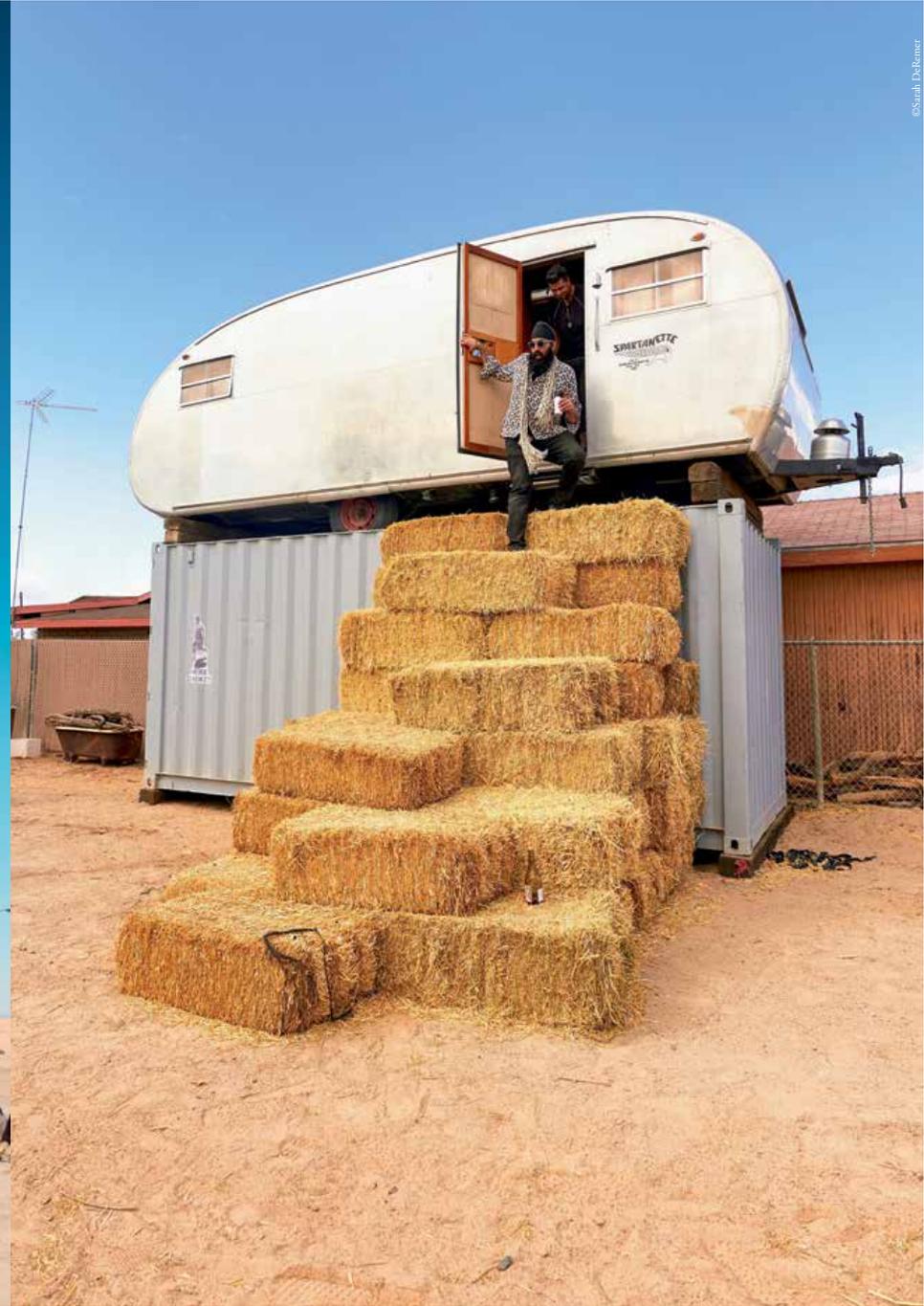


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