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Art Outside: Eighteen Sculptures Begin a Two-Year Residency on Palm Desert's El Paseo

Written by [Kevin Fitzgerald](#)



Brett Fiore's team installs one of the new sculptures on El Paseo. Below: "On Point," one of the new sculptures.

Kevin Fitzgerald

Locals often tell visitors to the Coachella Valley that they must sample the high-end shopping and dining experience that is El Paseo, in Palm Desert.

The pristine boulevard is the valley's answer to renowned destinations like Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills or Fifth Avenue in New York City. However, the stores and restaurants aren't the only things worthy of the window-shopper's attention; there's also El Paseo's incomparable 18-sculpture fine-art exhibition, which runs down the center median of the boulevard between the intersections with Highway 74 to the west, and Portola Avenue to the east.

"A lot of cities use Palm Desert as a model," said Deborah Schwartz Glickman, of Palm Desert's Public Art Department, who manages this ongoing exhibition. "For instance, someone looking to start a similar exhibition program contacted West Hollywood, which has an amazing program of their own. They sent that person to me for advice, so I know we're a respected program within the art community, both by artists and art administrators."



The exhibition program was initiated in the mid-to-late 1990s, according to Schwartz Glickman. The city is slated to spend \$486,800 on its entire Art in Public Places program this year, according to budget documents on the city's website; much of that money comes from a special fee for public art that's levied on new development.

"It is structured as a two-year exhibition of 18 sculptures that are loaned to the city for that timeframe either by the artist or a gallery. The artwork comes from across the country and often from around the globe," she said of the El Paseo exhibit.

It requires no small effort on the part of several city employees to bring each of the program's iterations to fruition for the public's enjoyment.

"It takes about a year to go through the whole process," said Schwartz Glickman. "We start by putting out a call for artists. I always say it goes to anyone who will listen. Then artists apply either with existing artworks or proposals for artworks. All are reviewed by a subcommittee of our Art and Public Places Commission, which selects the 18 sculptures and usually two or three alternates. Those choices are taken to the full Art in Public Places Commission, which, after a review, recommends their choices to the City Council, which must approve the selections."

Next is the logistical challenge of removing, or "de-installing," the outgoing exhibition and installing 18 new pieces for the new two-year display. This year, that process began in October, and continued through mid-November. Brett Fiore, an experienced sculpture restoration and maintenance professional who owns Signature Sculpture in Palm Desert, managed the process, as he has done since 2008.

"This is now the fourth collection that I will have installed and had my hands on," Fiore said. "I've seen all of these pieces come and go, and it's nice. When the artists get their pieces here ... they take a deep breath, and they can't believe that they're on El Paseo. They're just overwhelmed that they've finally made it to the top of the mountain."

But for Fiore, aided by friend and colleague Jeff Fowler (a sculptor and restorer), as well as the rest of his team, the work is just beginning.

"I tell the artists that the trip's not over, because we need to make sure that the piece looks just as good two years from now as it does today," Fiore said. "So I help formulate a maintenance program with the artist and the city to make sure that we do everything to keep the pieces in their best condition."

What goes into that maintenance effort? "For every piece, there has to be some sort of washing or waxing or cleaning," Fiore explained. "So, for instance, if the piece is made of glass, there has to be some basic dusting and washing. When you add on enamels or auto-body-type paint, you may take an approach to maintenance like you would with a Ferrari or a Porsche by washing and waxing it often, and in the same manner. For bronzes, we use special waxes that are made for bronze."

Local artist Patrick Blythe, whose piece "Harvest" was exhibited during the last two years, appreciated the opportunity.

"It's been a great adventure," Blythe said. "I've loved having it here on El Paseo, and I think the city of Palm Desert Art in Public Places (Commission has) been a wonderful host. They've taken good care of the piece, and it looks as good as the day it was installed."

The just-installed exhibition includes works by several area artists, including David Reid-Marr (who created "Cloud" specifically for El Paseo, pictured below) and Gerald Clarke, both of Idyllwild, as well as Mitchell Taylor of Joshua Tree, Janice Osborne of La Quinta, and Mario Pikus of Rancho Mirage.

For residents or visitors who would prefer a more-informed viewing, guided tours are available.

"We have a pool of trained docents, and we offer tours as part of our first-weekend event," Schwartz Glickman said. "Every month September through May, there are tours on Saturday mornings at 9 a.m. of either El Paseo's sculptures, the art work at Civic Center Park, or the art in the Palm Desert Library. But anyone who's interested can schedule a free private tour just by contacting my offices."

For more information on Palm Desert's Art in Public Places program, visit www.palm-desert.org/arts-culture/public-art.



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