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## TOURING *DesertArt Lab: Ecologies of Resistance*

October 13 – January 13, 2019

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This introduction emphasizes experiential inquiry-based learning by asking questions to help visitors think about the exhibition. Expertise on every work is not necessary.

### Pronunciation Guide:

April Bojorquez - (buh-hor-kez)

Rarámuri – ra-**ra**-mur-ee

Nopal - noh-pahl (a.k.a prickly pear)

Maguey – muh-gay (a.k.a agave or century plant)

Amaranth – am-uh-ranth (a.k.a pigweed)

Cholla – choy-uh

Huehuetlatolli – way-wayt-lah-toh-lee

Nawat (nah-waht) for “words of the ancient elders”

### With Visitors:

**INFORM:** The artists, April Bojorquez (Chicana/Rarámuri) and Matthew Garcia (Chicano) established the interdisciplinary art collaborative DesertArt LAB. They conceived the ecological field site (the space depicted in the video) as a social sculpture – that means that participants who interact with the space are part of the artwork. The site is located in Pueblo, Colorado

**DIRECT:** Walk through this gallery and think about what you have experienced of Colorado’s climate. **ASK:** [What adjectives would you use to describe the climate here?](#)

### INFORM:

- Colonization is defined as:
  - the practice of exploitation and oppression to control how people live, including land use, religious beliefs, culture, economy, food practice, etc.
  - the practice of a foreign country occupying another country with settlers to exert political control and exploit its resources.
- European colonizers of the Americas rejected indigenous food ways, introducing non-indigenous plants and crops to the continents; The landscape was also, in effect, colonized.
  - “One of the first things that happened during European colonization of the Americas was the control and destruction of the food systems in the Americas. So the colonial power, the European colonial powers, took special efforts to destroy the food practice in the Americas. And one of those plants that was targeted in the early days of the colonial campaign was Amaranth in central Mexico. The Spanish waged a campaign to eradicate Amaranth...” (Audio Tour)
  - The Spanish, however, were not the only Europeans involved in the destruction/capture of Indigenous food systems in the Americas. Some widely cited examples include: The tactical reduction (and near extinction) of the bison population, the takeover of fishing resources, the forced modification of agricultural practices to match the European model, the displacement of

Indigenous peoples to regions where their traditional food ways were not viable. *(This is not an exhaustive list)*

- All the species in the ecological field site are indigenous to the Southwest and survive in this landscape without being watered or fertilized.
- The specimens displayed on this wall (in frames and jars) are samples of indigenous plants, seeds and soil. *(remind them to only look- the display is art)*

ASK: Do any of these specimens look familiar to you? IF SO: Where have you seen them before? INFORM if they identify:

- Nopal – a cactus that can be eaten. “It’s known for its medicinal uses. It’s also known to be used in the cleaning or purification of water. Most importantly, it is a very resilient plant. It can survive in our most hostile environments with little to no help from humans.” (Audio Tour)
- Amaranth - A sacred plant used in ceremony as well as eaten. It is a grain with a particularly high % of protein. It has also developed resilience against modern chemical herbicides.
  - April and Matthew see Amaranth’s resilience as a metaphor for Indigenous people’s resilience in the face of colonization.
- Cholla – “a cactus that can live in high temperatures of above 110 degrees, but it can also live in temperatures as low as -20 degrees; when in bloom, a source of pollen for the bees.” (Audio Tour)

LOOK: Draw visitors’ attention to the juxtaposition of the window with the video ASK: Why do you think indigenous species (like cholla cactus – in the video) are not seen in spaces like our sculpture garden?

INFORM: April and Matthew “regrow indigenous ecologies in community space to revitalize ecological practice and reimagine indigenous dryland cosmology and aesthetic.” (Audio Tour)

The objects displayed in the center of the gallery were excavated from the site while it was being prepared for ecological revitalization.

ASK: What do these objects suggest to you about the space before it was the ecological field site?

INFORM: Decolonization is defined by the artists as: the process of revealing critiquing, and correcting systems of colonialist power and oppression

- These posters (West wall) are scanned maps that have been laser-cut.

ASK: How do these posters and the words of the ancient elders (South wall) help you understand decolonization?



## desert ArtLAB: Ecologies of Resistance

**May 19 - January 28, 2018**

Desert ArtLAB is an interdisciplinary art collaborative, established by museum curator/educator **April Bojorquez (Chicana/Rarámuri)** and artist/educator **Matthew Garcia (Chicano)**. The collaborative reconceptualizes desert/dryland ecologies not as post-apocalyptic growth of wasteland, but as an ecological opportunity. The exhibition *Ecologies of Resistance* illustrates the artistic process of the collaborative's site-specific ecological installation in the high desert of Southern, CO, through the use of artifacts, archival materials, and botanical samples. The collaborative is transforming a plot of blighted land into a thriving dryland ecosystem that also serves as an edible indigenous landscape. Informed by social sculpture, the collaborative believes artists have the ability to altruistically transform and shape their environments and society. Regrowing indigenous ecologies in community space allows for the revitalization of ecological practice and a reimagining of an indigenous dryland cosmology and aesthetic.

**April Bojorquez** has worked in the museum field nationally/internationally as an educator, curator, and researcher. She is based in the San Francisco area and Southern Colorado. Bojorquez is fellow of the Smithsonian Institution's Latino Museum Studies Program. She is a former faculty of American Ethnic Studies and assistant curator at the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum at Kansas State University. She also served as a curator of art at the National Hispanic Cultural Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Bojorquez works within the intersection of art and anthropology. Influenced by participatory practices and social sculpture, Bojorquez employs diverse strategies to produce immersive and interactive environments exploring place, identity and museum practices. Bojorquez is a 2016 Creative Capital Awardee in Emerging Fields.

**Matt Garcia's** artistic practice investigates ecology, its relationship to knowledge systems and how media can connect communities to a reclaiming or re-imagining of lost epistemology. Garcia is currently an assistant professor of Art and Design at Dominican University of California. Garcia was formerly an assistant professor of Digital/Experimental Media in the Department of Art at Kansas State University. Garcia's work has been presented nationally and internationally at venues such as: Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (Paris, France) The International Symposium on Electronic Art (2012, 2015), Balance-Unbalance Festival (Noose, Australia) and HASTAC (Lima, Peru). Garcia is a 2016 Creative Capital Awardee in Emerging Fields.

Special thanks to: Creative Capital Foundation, Pueblo City-County Library & Archive, Charlene Simms, Special Collections Librarian, 2016 Dryland Fellows: Brandon Ayala, Devlin Caldwell, and Jasmine Montoya.

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## IN CONVERSATION WITH DESERT ARTLAB

This exhibition incorporates an audio tour led by the artists in place of extended object labels. To hear commentary from the artists, use your cell phone to dial 1-505-312-5267, then enter the associated number (found on the label near the object). If you would prefer to read rather than listen, below is a transcription of the tour commentary:

### Audio Tour 15#

#### desert ArtLAB discusses field work in their ecological practice:

We at Desert ArtLAB think of our ecological art practice within the structure of systems. We do not believe that food practice and language and art and agriculture and cosmology are separate. We believe that these are part of systems. And through colonization many of these indigenous systems have been masked, erased, suppressed, and denied to indigenous communities. Through our ecological practice, DAL aims to engage communities in the sometimes displaced indigenous cosmologies and systems.



### Audio Tour 16#

#### desert ArtLAB discusses Indigenous Ecological Resilience and the grain amaranth:

One of the first things that happened during European colonization of the Americas was the control and destruction of the food systems in the Americas. So the colonial power, the European colonial powers, took special efforts to destroy the food practice in the Americas. And one of those plants that was targeted in the early days of the colonial campaign was amaranth in central Mexico. The Spanish waged a campaign to eradicate Amaranth. Amaranth was used as a sacred plant was used for many many purposes: eating, ceremony. It was also a very resilient plant.

Flash forward 500 years, one of the plants that provides the biggest headaches for the multinational chemical companies like Monsanto is a plant that their round-up ready chemicals don't affect. So there is a plant out there that's become resistant to their chemicals. So farmers go out there and purchase the round up ready seed, they spray the chemicals on the seeds and in the fields, expecting weeds to die but not

their crops. Well, it turns out there's this one-- they call it a weed--this one weed that's adapted. The round-up ready chemicals that Monsanto produces cannot kill it and this weed, the farmers throughout the midwest and the south call it pig weed. And they waged a campaign against this pig weed to essentially eradicate the pig weed. So they have a zero-tolerance campaign against the pig weed. Well, if you look into what the pig weed actually is, it's amaranth. The ancient, ancient amaranth continues to persist despite the most vicious circumstances. It lives on.

And we at Desert ArtLAB find that story to be an incredible metaphor for the story and journey of indigenous peoples in the Americas. So we pay special attention to the amaranth and we are growing that round up ready- that chemical-resistant strain of amaranth. And what you see here is that chemical resistant strain of amaranth that can withstand the chemical attacks of colonization. Thank you.

## Audio Tour 17#

### desert ArtLAB discusses Indigenous Ecological Resilience and cholla cactus:

When we design our ecological growth installations, we pay special attention to dry land plants that are especially resilient. Cholla cactus is one of those plants. It embodies all the qualities that we at Desert ArtLAB believe in.

While at first look it is a sort of tough, vicious-looking plant, when you get to know the plant, it is a gentle and beautiful plant that can really endure the most extreme conditions. The Cholla cactus can live in high temperatures of above 110 degrees, but it can also live in temperatures as low as -20 degrees. Its ability to live within these extremes provides us at DAL inspiration for our ecological growth sites.

And for about two weeks a year in June in the

high deserts, the Cholla will bloom the most radiant magenta flowers that become incredible source of pollen for the bees. At our field site the cholla are the center of the ecological installation we have. And we envision that once the ecological site is complete for two weeks in June within the center of our ecological installation, you will be surrounded by a brilliant and beautiful two week blossom from the cholla.

We also envision the cholla serving as the source of the cholla bud roast. As the ecological site develops—years down the road as the cholla develop—we will have community cholla bud roasts at our field site in the urban core of Pueblo, Colorado. Thanks.



## Audio Tour 18#

### desert ArtLAB discusses Indigenous Ecological Resilience and nopal cactus:

For us at DAL, the Nopal cactus becomes the perfect symbol of the systems that we are exploring and unravelling. The Nopal cactus can be eaten. It's known for its medicinal uses. It's also known to be used in the cleaning or purification of water. And its also attached to many, many ancient histories of the Americas. So it becomes a perfect plant to explore the systems of ecology and how they are attached to culture and medicine and food all in one plant. Most importantly, it is a very resilient plant. It can survive in our most hostile environments with little to no help from humans. It becomes a window into a perennial agricultural system that we at dal continue to explore at our field site in southern Colorado.

## Audio Tour 20#

### desert ArtLAB discusses Huehuetlatolli, Words of the Elders:

“Huehuetlatolli” is Nawat for “words of the ancient elders.” These words were often taught to children to give them guidance through their lives. These were ancient Nawat words. Nawat was one of the most widely spoken languages in the Americas before colonization



## Audio Tour 21#

### desert ArtLAB discusses the Aesthetics of Ecological Resilience:

Ecological resistance explores the ecological installation that Desert ArtLAB is in the process of creating in the high deserts of southern Colorado. The location of the installation is in Pueblo, Colorado, which has long been a Chicano stronghold. The ecological installation in Pueblo, Colorado, attempts to re-establish a growing and edible indigenous ecological space embedded in the urban core of Pueblo, Colorado.

The context of the ecological installation in the high desert of Pueblo, Colorado, is important to the exhibition. Pueblo, Colorado, was home to at one point at least four smelting companies,

and large portions of the urban core today are designated as superfund sites--which means they are so contaminated they qualify for federal funding to clean up the contamination. These areas of contaminations are in the urban core and communities continue to live in these areas.

Our approach for our ecological installation in southern Colorado and in this exhibit is to at times challenge western concepts of ecological interpretation and cultural interpretation through the perspective of displaced indigenous narratives.