

The Remote and the Vital: Connecting California's Desert with Iceland

By Parker Yamasaki

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The California desert is a land based in contradiction. A place where the feeling of impending apocalypse mingles closely with hopeful utopia. Where alien encounters are as common as daily prayer, and often intersect one another. Where “off-the-grid” communities share borders with a military base. It is a place of tangled human existence and messily woven magic.

Brian Scott Campbell lives in Joshua Tree, California, one of the more accessible sites of this human paradox. Appropriately, he is inspired by the “quirky and psychological.” He drops artists like Nick Payne, Irena Jurek and Austin English in conversation, and is “generally always seeking something strange or surprising—something that feels urgent and exuberant.”

It just so happens

Brian graduated with a BFA from Columbus College of Art & Design and an MFA from Mason Gross School of the Arts. He travelled around exhibiting in collective and solo shows. He rented a small studio in Ohio while visiting his family and fell in love with an Icelandic woman stranded in Cincinnati. The two of

them leapt to the West Coast in 2013, setting up shop (and studio) in Santa Barbara, California, and eventually moved to the desert because he “always admired the idea of living in the desert, and the timing just so happened to be right.”

Absurd and inspiring as the desert can be, its summer highs reach 45° C, regularly, and can be a bit stifling to the creative process. Brian and his partner have been splitting their time between Iceland and the States, and are thinking about making Iceland their “spot for the summer.”

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“I’ve always had an interest in Iceland, and the art that is made in this part of the world,” says Brian. “My aim is really just to expand my knowledge of art that is happening here, and to somehow take part in it.” Step by step, he’s making his way into Reykjavík’s prolific art scene. This June he stepped through the doors of the Harbinger Project Space at Freyjugata 1 for the opening night of a month-long show—which he curated.

The show is called ‘Zing Zam Blunder’, a name inspired by the Captain Beefheart song title “Zig Zag Wanderer,” and elaborated on by a poem that Chris Hutchinson wrote for the exhibition. Brian has hand-selected works by 25 artists from Iceland and the USA. The drawings were brought together by Brian’s personal taste: “I simply wanted to see them next to each other on the wall,” he says, explaining that the works are united by “a somewhat unified ‘outsider’ aesthetic... a clunky awkwardness, and ham-fisted tentativeness that I relate to in my own work.”

Crossed communication

Harbinger was conceived as a place to present foreign and local work equally, and has, from its beginning, worked hard to foster the community created by unlikely combinations. “I’ve lived in much larger cities where there’s a significant population of artists, but I really have a special love for art made in remarkable places,” Brian says. “There’s not much that the deserts of California have in common with Iceland, but there’s certainly a remoteness and vitality that they share.”

‘Zing Zam Blunder’ will be on display at Harbinger until July 23. Take a look for a peek inside this curator’s mind—celebrating art that’s created whether because of or in spite of difficult conditions, and the community that is formed in the remote and the vital.

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