

# Cultivating Community Through Creativity

AS LAGUNA ART MUSEUM PREPARES TO MARK A MILESTONE WITH THE 10TH YEAR OF ITS ART & NATURE FESTIVAL, THE ORGANIZATION LOOKS TO EMBRACE CONNECTION AND ADD MEANING TO ITS OFFERINGS.

By ASHLEY RYAN

S

ince Julie Perlin Lee took over as executive director of Laguna Art Museum in spring 2021, things have been flowing smoothly. The number of exhibitions has increased and programming has quadrupled, reasserting the cultural center as a pivotal part of the fabric of the local community.

And now, the museum is on the verge of hosting the 10th iteration of its annual Art & Nature festival, a campaign held Nov. 3-6 this year that is dedicated to celebrating outdoor artwork, creativity and the environment. “It was really meant to bring a broad body of people together,” Lee says.

With major changes coming, this year’s Art & Nature itinerary is unlike any you’ve seen before. But, before we reveal what the museum has in store for the arts community this fall, let’s venture back in time to learn how the event got to where it is today.

## LOOKING BACK

When the Laguna Beach Art Association started over a century ago, the founders had no idea what it would grow into. All they knew was that Laguna’s rolling hills and sparkling coves were particularly stunning subjects for plein air paintings. But 90 years later,

Malcolm Warner—the longtime director who preceded Lee—dreamed up the festival.

“Warner had been asked to come up with a new concept for Laguna Art Museum that brought the community together and still focused on celebrating the museum’s commitment to the early founders’ vision, which was to capture nature out of doors,” Lee reveals. “So that’s how Art & Nature was conceived.”

The first year, 2013, saw a robust schedule of programming to accompany an untitled piece by Jim Denevan on Main Beach. As a land artist, Denevan creates geometric shapes in the earth, but his Art & Nature piece also incorporated

2,500 solar lanterns to light up the outline.

Other early designs included a project from Lita Albuquerque titled “An Elongated Now” that saw 200 participants dressed in white lined up along the beach, an “Electric Light Blanket” with choreographed lasers by Laddie John Dill and “1/4 Mile Arc,” where Phillip K. Smith III spaced out mirrors on the sand that separated the natural environment from that of the town.

In 2017, Pablo Vargas Lugo ventured into the water with his installation “Seascape,” which featured a floating streetlight—commentary on the way the city has expanded over the years, with man-made buildings obstructing the natural



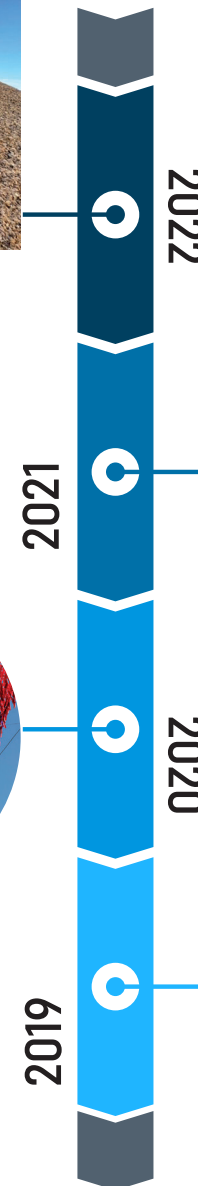
Patrick Shearn's 2020 installation over Heisler Park



“Pyramidion,” planned this fall, by Kelly Berg



“Sunset Trace” by Patrick Shearn



“Any-Instant-Whatever” by Rebeca Méndez



“360° Azimuth” by Yorgo Alexopoulos



The Art & Nature Family Festival

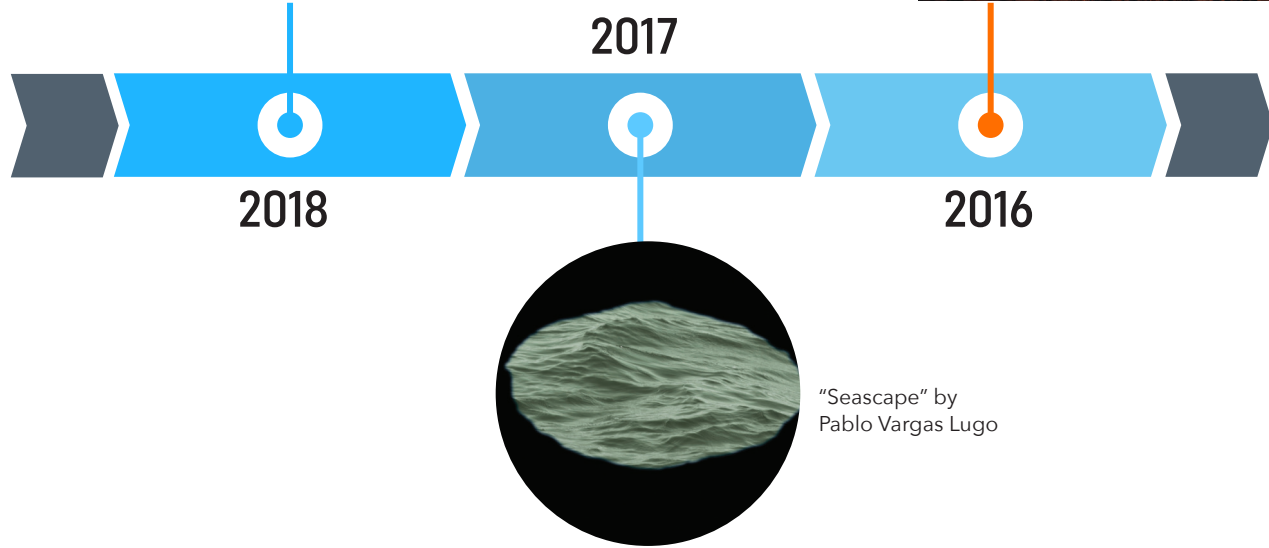




"Shoreline Project" by Elizabeth Turk



"1/4 Mile Arc" by Phillip K. Smith III



landscapes that once drew artists to its shoreline.

The following year, the festival saw another performance-based installation, with Elizabeth Turk rounding up 1,000 volunteers to hold LED-adorned umbrellas for "Shoreline Project." The stunning display was inspired by the movement of nature. Then, in 2019, the museum showcased "360° Azimuth," a video projection by Yorgo Alexopoulos, marking the first time Art & Nature's main installation had ventured inside the museum doors.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic in

2020, the museum came up with a commissioned piece that could be viewed outdoors while social distancing—and "Sunset Trace" by Patrick Shearn was just the vibrant piece the public needed during a dark time. The kinetic installation, meant to mimic flocks of birds or schools of fish, moved in the wind amongst the palm trees. In 2021, the festival moved back indoors for the multimedia presentation of "Any-Instant-Whatever" by Rebeca Méndez, an experience meant to inspire viewers to stay present in their lives.

While keynote speakers and events have filled in the schedule over the years, it's the engagement with locals that makes the festival stand out. From the beginning, art galleries and organizations in town were invited to participate, hosting their own exhibits inspired by the intersection of art and science. From the Laguna Plein Air Painters Association to the Boys & Girls Club of Laguna Beach, celebrations occurred in unexpected places, uniting the community and showcasing the power of that connection. Though outside involvement has waned, Lee says the museum aims to bring that back this year, too.

## A FESTIVE FETE

Any way you look at it, the 2022 iteration of Art & Nature is exciting. For years, the festival was centered around one commissioned piece, but Lee and her team have expanded this year to incorporate different artworks, a world-renowned keynote speaker and multiple events to round out the weekend.

Coinciding with November's First Thursdays Art Walk, festivities kick off Nov. 3, when this year's outdoor installation launches. "Pyramidion" by Los Angeles-based artist Kelly Berg (pending approval by the city Arts Commission) parallels the planet's changing climates, with pyramid sculptures in various colors and sizes placed throughout Heisler Park to reflect the shifting nature of the land.

"We are providing an experience that leads up to the museum—or, if you start at the museum, that leads out into nature," Lee says.

Another piece, "The Sea Around Us" by Méndez, the 2021 artist, will be located in the museum's Steele Gallery. An immersive, 360-degree film experience, it takes viewers into the Pacific Ocean, contrasting the interconnectedness of the sea with harmful barrels of DDT on the ocean bottom.

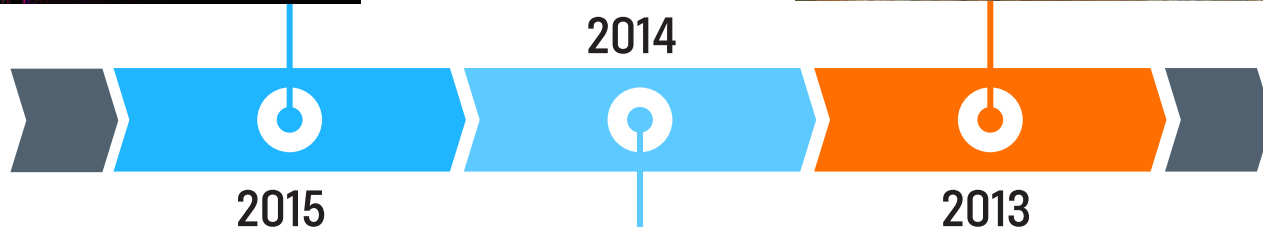
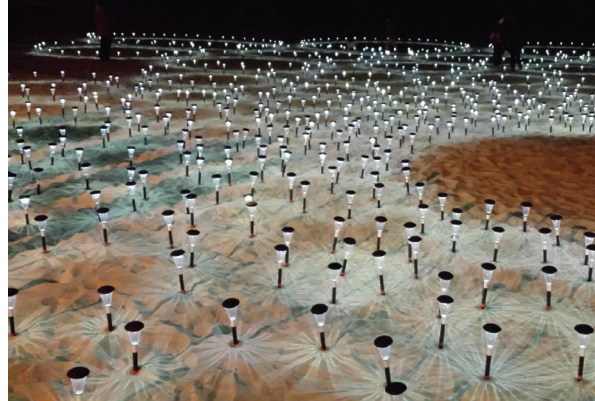


"The Sea Around Us" by Rebeca Méndez



"Electric Light Blanket" by Laddie John Dill

An untitled piece by Jim Denevan



"An Elongated Now" by Lita Albuquerque

"This year, we will be a little bit more assertive with our message that we feel the world is changing. ... I don't think we've ever talked about climate change very openly as a museum," Lee notes.

Though pieces that are commissioned for Art & Nature are typically only shown for the weekend, "The Sea Around Us" will be on display into February of next year, along with another piece being added during the festival: "The Big One" by the late Robert Young, co-founder of Sawdust Art Festival. At a whopping 9 feet tall, the title is accurate as can be, and the large

canvas is filled with coral reefs and sea creatures.

This year's keynote speaker, marine biologist and oceanographer Sylvia Earle, will give a lecture Nov. 4 on the health of the ocean. "Her talk will be on the positive side—on the [problem] solving, not just talking about the difficulties that the ocean is experiencing," Lee adds.

In addition, the museum will host the Art & Nature Party that same night, with the launch of Méndez's artwork, live music, cocktails and more. "We wanted to create an evening that still benefits the museum—still supports our initiatives—but is more accessible to the community," she says. "... It will just be a time to gather together, enjoy the exhibitions and really celebrate the community's commitment to nature."

On the final day, Nov. 6, guests can also enjoy the Family Festival—which is taking place at and around the museum instead of simply indoors. "We're ... [creating] an itinerary so that you can come and do a workshop at noon, or maybe at 12:30 you want to participate in a dance, or at 1 o'clock you want to take an exploratory walk," Lee explains.

#### MAKING AN IMPACT

While Art & Nature has always been a grand affair, the museum is taking it above and beyond in 2022—with hopes of expanding even more in

coming years. "We're casting a pretty broad net to see who might want to come and participate," Lee notes. In fact, the Art & Nature festival committee, made up of museum board members and local community members, is already hard at work seeking artists for next year's event.

"It's fascinating to me to bring ... so many high-level, problem-solving people, either through the sciences or the arts, who are addressing [problems] today," Lee says. "... The arts can bring messaging to a much broader audience in a way that's not aggressive or confrontational, but thoughtful and eye-opening, so [it] feels good to be able to do that."

Of course, there are plenty in town ready and willing to take part. A number of galleries host simultaneous shows with nature-inspired works throughout the month of November, and the museum is in talks with Coast Film & Music Festival, which takes place Nov. 9-13, to offer cross-programming, as both organizations support artists working in nature.

"We feel really grateful that we're in an arts-driven community and really proud that so many people are able to make their living and share their artwork with the people who come to Laguna Beach, so [partnering with galleries] is a win-win," she says. "... Together, we're making up one positive, artistic, creative ecosystem." ■



Children view sea life at the Family Festival.