

## VISUAL ARTS

# Environmental Artist Doron Gazit Sculpts the Wind

Sarah Linn | May 6, 2016



"The Red Line" at the Salton Sea. | Photo: Courtesy of Doron Gazit.

A plump red tube snakes along the desolate shores of the Salton Sea, past abandoned bird nests, sun-bleached fish carcasses and resort town ruins. Once an inland playground for Hollywood elite, the rapidly shrinking sea nestled in the Coachella and Imperial valleys has morphed into a polluted pool inundated with algae blooms.

To environmental artist Doron Gazit, "The Red Line" resembles a scarlet artery. But instead of blood, it's pumping air -- the very breath of life.

"I see in front of my eyes the environment is being destroyed," explained the Los Angeles-based artist and industrial designer, who originally hails from Israel. "With my own language, with my medium, I'm trying to draw attention to and raise awareness of all the catastrophes that are happening around us."

In his first-ever museum exhibition, Gazit explores his project "The Red Line." The show, which runs April 1 through May 30 at the San Luis Obispo Museum of Art, pairs photographs of Gazit's past work with an installation that winds through the museum and around its blocky exterior like a contented plastic python.

"The Red Line" marks the first time the museum has hosted such an art installation, exhibition and development director Ruta Saliklis said, noting that the show is part of a broader effort to focus on environmental issues. "It's exciting," she said. "I like seeing people's reactions to it and talking about it."



Inflatables form a colorful rainbow, or, airbow, in the Judeean Desert in Israel. | Photo: Courtesy of Doron Gazit.

If you ask Gazit, it all began with the balloon. Specifically, his fascination with inflatables -- "I don't use the b-word," he said with a laugh -- found its foundation on the streets of Jerusalem.

"I used to sell twisty balloons to make my living" as an industrial design student at Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Arts, Gazit explained. "Shortly after, it



turned into my inspiration.”

Realizing that the balloons were, in fact, three-dimensional lines that he could draw with as effectively as a pen or pencil, he developed long, flexible inflatables known as Airtubes.

In 1984, Gazit was invited to decorate the Olympic Games in Los Angeles, leading to the creation of his company Air Dimensional Design, or, AirDD. Gazit's colorful Airtubes have coiled up columns at the U.S. Customs House in New York City, tethered Tokyo's Fuji TV building and entwined 17 towers of metal scaffolding at a Luciano Pavarotti concert in Mexicali, Mexico; they've also appeared at Burning Man, the World Cup, the World Expo, three Olympics and five Super Bowls.



"The Red Line" at the Dead Sea. | Photo: Courtesy of Doron Gazit.

Over the years, the company based in North Hollywood has branched out into all manner of inflatable shapes, from undulating scrims to waffle-patterned walls to illuminated blooms, tusks and tentacles.

“I can take any environment and change it for a one-day event and make it look spectacular,” said Gazit, who sees his success as proof that inflatables are no longer just for birthday clowns.

“That's something I've had to fight for many, many years -- the preconceived notion of what is a balloon. People say it's for children, it's [a toy that's] good for only two hours,” he said. “People are now used to the idea that art is being done with glass, with metal, with wood and paper, but balloons still really stay in the category of kids' parties.”

At least one design popularized by AirDD wouldn't seem out of place at such a gathering.

The company holds the patent for the Fly Guys, dancing humanoid figures that debuted at the closing ceremony of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. The flailing inflatables, also known as AirDancers or SkyDancers, have since become ubiquitous at gas stations, shopping malls and used car lots; and they've even been parodied on the animated show “Family Guy.”



"Sculpting the wind" on sand dunes in Israel. | Photo: Courtesy of Doron Gazit.

“I'm surprised -- I'm shocked, actually -- to be [connected] to something so popular,” Gazit said, noting that he no longer manufactures the Fly Guys. (Rather, he licenses the design to companies such as Above & Beyond, Inflate Co. and Look Our Way Inflatables.) Lately, he's grown less interested in the commercial aspect of his work.

“I had to make my living, so I had my company. But all the time -- I'm talking more than 30 years -- I did my environmental art,” Gazit said. “It was only for



my family, my friends. I see myself now as an environmental artist coming out of the cabinet.”

About nine months ago, Gazit began to work on “The Red Line,” which examines ecological turmoil on the ground level. “It’s literally drawing the line, drawing attention to the catastrophes that are happening all over the world,” Gazit said. “I’m trying to raise the consciousness and awareness to climate change, to the drought, to global warming and also man’s misuse of the environment.”



Doron Gazit and an assistant install "The Red Line" at the San Luis Obispo Museum of Art. | Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Although his previous works have mostly featured "happy" colors such as yellows, oranges and greens, Gazit said red seemed like a more appropriate hue for this project. “Now I feel that I need to shout. I need to scream,” he said.

Using a method he alternatively refers to as “sculpting the wind” and “visualizing the invisible,” Gazit channels air currents through 500-foot-long inflatable vinyl tubes. (Outdoor installations rely on the wind to hold their shape, while he uses a blower known as an air fountain for interior works.) He

then photographs his creations before disassembling them and moving on to different sites.

“When I’m working in nature, nature actually turns out to be my canvas,” said Gazit. As much, he seeks out visually striking backgrounds where humankind’s impact on the environment is writ large.

So far, “The Red Line” has taken him to the Salton Sea, where he’s explored the dusty ruins of Desert Beach, and the Dead Sea bordered by Jordan, Israel and the West Bank, where dropping water levels have led to the creation of large underground cavities, leaving the landscape pockmarked with about 5,000 sinkholes. He’s also explored the charred aftermath of a wildfire in the Sierra Pelona Mountains near Lake Quail.



Inflatable tubes form a pyramid at the beach in Santa Monica. | Photo: Courtesy of Doron Gazit.

Gazit plans to bring “The Red Line” to “many more locations that are affected by climate change,” he said, including Alaska, Iceland and the Amazonian rainforest. “Whenever I’m hearing there is another problem with nature, I’m trying to get down to the depths of it,” he said. “Wherever I go, I want to learn about the specific problem that hit that environment.”

Gazit first visited the Central Coast in 2013, when he worked with an interdisciplinary team of Cal Poly professors and students on an “air-architecture” design project at the first San Luis Obispo Mini-Maker Faire.



He returned to San Luis Obispo earlier this year with the purpose of positioning “The Red Line” along the cracked bed of Laguna Lake, transformed by the California drought from a suburban oasis to a dry, dusty meadow. “Laguna Lake was gone, totally gone. ...It was a moonscape,” Saliklis said, noting that the lake has refilled somewhat since then.



"The Red Line" at Laguna Lake in San Luis Obispo. | Photo: Courtesy of Doron Gazit.

Days before “The Red Line” opened at the San Luis Obispo Museum of Art, Gazit and museum preparator Daniel Solis ventured to another local spot shaped by powerful forces: the site of the Park Hill Fire, which scorched nearly 1,800 acres east of Santa Margarita and destroyed multiple homes. They gathered burned tree branches and other debris that Gazit incorporated into his installation.

Saliklis said Gazit’s show takes viewers on a journey. “He’s done it. He’s gone. He’s taken the risks and we can enjoy [the results],” she said.

And “The Red Line” is not without its risks. “Sometimes this big tube turns into a huge sail. Sometimes I fall down to the ground,” said Gazit, who chipped his elbow during his Dead Sea installation when he sank into the mud.

It's worth it, he said, to develop a dialogue between humanity and the environment. "There's a word in Hebrew called *rouch*. The word has two meanings -- one is 'wind' and the other is 'spirit.' Doing this work I feel like I'm visualizing the spirit of nature," Gazit said.



Inflatable tubes over a burnt forest in Israel. | Photo: Courtesy of Doron Gazit.





Inflatable tubes add color to the New York Convention Center. | Photo: Courtesy of Doron Gazit.



Doron Gazit's "Medusa" in a Santa Monica airport hangar. | Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

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