

*Desert Empire*  
Dimitri Staszewski

*This land here, people don't stop. They just go through it.*

- Worker at the National Chloride Mine of America in Amboy, CA

## **Summary**

*Desert Empire* examines how residents and visitors are reflected in the barren landscapes of the Morongo Basin in Southern California during a moment of rapid change. In a region comfortable with the cycles of natural and human history, this series questions whether this fits into that repetitive tide or if the Basin lies at the crossroads of an unprecedented cultural and physical shift.

This series was created over the course of the seven-week Joshua Tree Highlands Artist Residency.

## **Statement**

Bringing both order and chaos to the desert landscape, humans make their presence felt in these barren and fragile ecosystems. A chloride mine rips a seam through the Earth as visitors trample delicate desert plants. Rows of palm trees reveal themselves as manufactured symbols of success while desert flowers burst forth regardless of who is watching.

At the same time, humanity is reflected in the orderly and chaotic qualities inherent to the natural world. Sun-baked human bodies and the structures they create are imbued with a desert haze as their exteriors deteriorate alongside each other.

I traversed and stepped away from the paths, trails, and roads of the Morongo Basin to make images that preserve the feelings these dystopian landscapes elicit. As this overlooked enclave of Southern California is electrified by a feeling of transformation, that preservation feels necessary.

The Morongo Basin is ripe for change as people have taken notice of this land's harsh beauty. They now stop in the places they used to pass through.

The tension between new, longtime, and ancient residents is not necessarily apparent at first glance. Looking closer, the distinctions become clear. The relics of time passing show where humans have made a lasting mark and where their stories fade and become desert once again.

While that tension exists and the future remains unclear, these images aim to show a reverence for the ways in which the natural world and humanity exist as mirrors for each other—to pay homage to their collaborative efforts knowing that drastic change may be coming.