

Renaissance at Rhyolite

Contributed by Chad Sorg

Sporting ghosts, a 25-foot nude, Jesus and big plans for the future, the Goldwell museum is smarter than your average roadside attraction

Story and photos by Chad Sorg

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Most ghost towns cannot guarantee that you'll see any actual ghosts, but if you were at the site of Rhyolite, Nevada, you could hang out with more than a dozen of them -- and a giant nude woman, too.

Situated at the upper end of the Mojave Desert, overlooking the stunning Amargosa Valley, you'll find the Goldwell Open Air Museum. It's next to Rhyolite, a heavily photographed ghost town with a population of zero and just a few miles from Beatty, a town of 1,000 and known as "Nevada's Gateway to Death Valley". This lonely art destination is itself unpopulated, but that might change very soon.

The inanimate occupants, ghostly or nude, belong to Goldwell's collection of seven outdoor public sculptures, with more to come. Surrounded by the sculptures, a small house is being used as a visitor's center. These and a more distantly placed red barn occupy 15 acres of desolate land that most viewers would find hard to believe constitute a museum. The unassuming red barn is the key to Goldwell's future; the sculpture park is its link to the past.

More than twenty years ago, a Polish-born Belgian artist named Albert Szukalski, who died in 2000, created The Last Supper, on location in Rhyolite. The ghostly 3 dimensional figures render Leonardo DaVinci's fresco of the same name in thick, white, hollowed, fiberglass form. The life-sized ghosts of Jesus and his disciples aligned on a long platform now greet visitors. Backdrop to the ghosts is a beautiful expanse of open desert, eventually dropping down past sea level into Death Valley. If a traveler times it right, he can witness the sunset over the valley of death and stand in the shadow of Jesus.

Other sculptures on view are composed of rust-covered steel, aging wood, chrome car bumpers, bicycles, granite and, in the case of Lady Desert, the aforementioned nude that stands 25 feet tall, cinderblocks. All sculpture present was created by Belgian artist friends of Szukalski, except for one piece, created by Beatty resident and ornamental stone artisan David Spicer.

Through funding and donations, private and public, the museum non-profit organization has been able to preserve and restore these works but a central mission for the group has been to build itself into a site that will house art studios, allowing visiting artists to create in isolation.

The barn, or at least the spot it is on, will eventually become an artist residency program, which means that artists will soon be living in this inspiring location, on a very part-time basis. Residencies will range from a couple weeks to several months.

"Artist communities function as research and development labs for the arts," said Museum president Charles Morgan. "They provide artists with the opportunity to focus on creating new work by providing dedicated time and space for making art and the opportunity to interact with other artists."

Similar programs around the nation include the Headlands Center for the Arts in Sonoma County, the Bemis Center in Omaha, and Arrowmont School of Arts & Crafts in Tennessee.

Of Goldwell's isolation, the museum's secretary-treasurer, Suzanne Hackett-Morgan explains, "we feel it's a content rich environment; 15 miles away is Death Valley as well as the Amargosa Dune."

Hackett-Morgan, who is married to Goldwell president Charles Morgan, is happy to be walking away from her six-figure day job in June for a more full-time position serving the museum. The project envisions three-phase plan, which includes a few open studio spaces with residencies attached and a more permanent visitors center. "Also in the works, but sooner, we plan to have Goldwell operating as a wireless hotspot, so visitors can pull up and download video podcasts explaining some details," Hackett-Morgan said.

Destination Art, a guide to 200 art sites is a book published last December featuring some of the world's most interesting places to view art. Included in the book is Goldwell as well as Michael Heizer's Double Negative and James Turrell's Roden Crater. Purchase of the book through Goldwell's website will benefit the organization.

Travelers are always free to check out Goldwell at anytime of the day or year but are encouraged to go to <http://www.goldwellmuseum.org/> to make sure the visitor's center will be open. A video about the making of The Last Supper is available on the site as well.