Art in America

A Must-See SITE Santa Fe International Captures the Power of Storytelling

By *Emily Watlington* July 2, 2025 5:00am

Works by Penny Siopis and D.H. Lawrence in the 12th SITE Santa Fe International, "Once Within A Time," 2025. Photo Brad Trone

In the 1990s, when curator Cecilia Alemani was a teenager in Italy, she would stay up late watching the films of Godfrey Reggio, who helped spark a lifelong passion for Surrealism—one that would be central to Alemani's highly acclaimed 2022 edition of the Venice Biennale, titled "The Milk of Dreams." So when SITE Santa Fe invited her to curate the latest edition of its biennial (now called the SITE Santa Fe International), she was delighted to find that Reggio, best known for his

cult classic, *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), was based in New Mexico, and decided to pay him a visit.

I'm starting with a story because the resulting show is all about the power of storytelling. The exhibition is titled after Reggio's latest film, *Once Within a Time* (2022); the 55-minute work is on display in the heart of the show. The film can only be described as trippy, an absurdist mash-up of imagery that oscillates between apocalyptic and enchanting—as when a dragon's blood tree slowly fades into a mushroom cloud. Hope and doom loop cyclically here, in art as in life. Mike Tyson plays a mentor character, and Philip Glass scores it all. If you've lost the plot, that's the point—so has humanity.

The rest of the exhibition tells stories in ways just as winding and wonderfully weird. New Mexico is this show's protagonist, with Alemani twisting and layering its archetypes. Southwest symbols abound: UFOs, Land art, military experiments, Native artists, spirituality, nature—all folding in on one another as things do in Reggio's film. Notably, Alemani's story has characters—she calls them "figures of interest"—many of them writers who took up residence in the state, like D.H. Lawrence, Cormac McCarthy, Vladimir Nabokov, and Willa Cather. There's also the language-bender Chester Nez, one of the Navajo Code Talkers who used their Native language to encode messages during World War II, as well as two puppets made in New Mexico: a fire spirit and a witch. These figures are represented by way of surprisingly enjoyable narrative wall labels or, in some cases, by strange objects they produced—as with Nabokov's intricate drawings of butterflies.

The storytelling theme is introduced near the entrance to SITE by Helen Cordero's terra-cotta sculptures of Cochiti Pueblo elders, mouths agape mid-story, children clinging to their limbs. From there, sex and death star in the show's greatest tales—again, in art as in life. The three best sections are on eros, energy, and the military. One room is filled mostly with sexy paintings, like D.H. Lawrence's orgiastic canvases that, in

1929,were banned in the United Kingdom and so wound up in Taos, where the writer briefly lived. Eventually, they were displayed behind a curtain at a fancy hotel. Louise Bonnet responded to these canvases directly, sharing Lawrence's interest in sumptuous butts. Nearby, exquisite paintings by Norman Zammitt show body parts in boxes, and for their nudity and strange sensuality, they too were censored, in 1963, while Zammitt was teaching at the University of New Mexico. His contract was not renewed, and soon, he gave up figurative art altogether. These paintings, rarely shown since, are among the show's most incredible discoveries.

"Once Within a Time" seeps beyond SITE Santa Fe to a dozen or so additional venues—other museums, a hotel, even a cannabis shop—providing a scope that feels expansive but not exhausting. At the New Mexico Military Museum, themes of war and extraterrestrial life converge; impressively, Alemani sticks the landing with work by veterans like Joseph Yoakum and John McCracken alongside Karla Knight's encoded abstractions that echo the militarized space race. At this venue—ordinarily attended by veterans and United States history buffs—Alemani also shows a film by Lebanese artist Ali Cherri, whose parents were both recently killed by an Israeli bomb. The Watchman (2023) is set in Cyprus and stars soldiers who look dreary and surreal: When the protagonist encounters an enemy platoon, each combatant's eyes are eerily sealed shut, the odd nighttime light appearing to borrow from classic scenes of alien invasions. In the section at the Military Museum, the power of storytelling feels frightening, with apocalyptic technologies and takeover fantasies that were once the stuff of science fiction becoming terrifyingly real.

Of course, the most world-ending invention to date was developed just 30 minutes away in Los Alamos, home to the atomic bomb. Energy, both nuclear and spiritual, is the subject of a standout section back at SITE. Photographs by Will Wilson (Diné) pair canonical earthworks like Spiral Jetty with uranium mining sites in the Navajo Nation. When the US government began leasing Navajo land and hiring miners to gather

materials for the Manhattan Project, they failed to offer warnings of uranium's deadly effects, and instead studied the miners like lab rats. They documented high rates of cancer without sharing their findings, staying silent as workers took rocks home to their families to build chimneys. Juxtaposed as they are by Wilson, the mines and the earthworks both look like intrusive incisions in unceded land, the art a scar.

Wilson's photographs are shown across from dreamy abstractions by Agnes Pelton and Florence Miller Pierce, both of the Transcendental Painting Group. Nearby are updated versions of Southwest spiritual paintings by the young artist Diego Medina (Piro/Manso/Tiwa) that blend Indigenous motifs, Christian mysticism, and UFOs. Ximena Garrido-Lecca's installation ties together this section's various kinds of energy: The Peruvian artist reconstructed a circuit board that NASA developed for the Apollo program, replacing its metal wires with ropes referencing quipus, or Andean recordkeeping knots. Garrido-Lecca reclaims the spiritual significance copper once held for Andean peoples before Peru became a leading exporter of the material, its extraction devastating local nature and culture alike.

In the show as in Reggio's film, time spirals instead of marching forward, everything happening "within" rather than "upon" a time. I felt time folding in on itself most acutely—and most devastatingly—in a work by David Horvitz. His installation, which takes up its own room at Finquita Project, acknowledges a Japanese internment camp located in Santa Fe's Casa Solana neighborhood: Horvitz gathered sand from the site and encased it in handmade glass marbles, one each for the 4,555men who were kidnapped and incarcerated there. Horvitz is half Japanese, and his grandmother was interned in Colorado. Wanting to speak to his two children about this history, he made another unofficial contribution to the International, re-creating with his kids a small cat sculpture from the New Mexico History Museum's collection that had been made by an internee, the Buddhist Reverend Tamasaku Watanabe. The resulting spindly cats hide in unlikely locations around the biennial

and without wall labels—including in the rental car Alemani has been driving there.

During a panel discussion at the opening, someone asked Horvitz if he thinks of his marbles as a memorial. He replied by asking if memorials necessarily commemorate something that has passed. If so, he said, then no—the US government is currently kidnapping and detaining people of color just as it did then. If the best stories collapse time and space in uncanny ways, the most awful ones do too.