



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kim Stringfellow is an artist and educator residing in Joshua Tree, California. She teaches multimedia and photography courses at San Diego State University as an associate professor in the School of Art, Design, and Art History. She received her MFA in Art and Technology from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2000. Her professional practice and research interests address ecological, historical, and activist issues related to land use and the built environment through hybrid documentary forms incorporating writing, digital media, photography, audio, video, installation, mapping, and locative media. Among other awards, she is the 2012 recipient of the Theo Westenberger Award for Artistic Excellence. Stringfellow's work has been exhibited nationally at many prominent museums. Her newest audio tour project titled, *There It Is—Take It!* was funded by the California Council for Humanities in 2011. She is an editor at *ARID: A Journal of Desert, Art and Ecology* and also writes about SoCal arts and culture for KCET Artbound. <http://www.jackrabbithomestead.com>

Jackrabbit Homestead: Tracing the Small Tract Act in the Southern California Landscape, 1938-2008, a project by Kim Stringfellow is organized by Culver Center of the Arts @ UCR ARTSblock and curated by Tyler Stallings, Artistic Director, Culver Center of the Arts & Director, Sweeney Art Gallery, University of California, Riverside. UCR's College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (CHASS) and the City of Riverside have provided support.

IMAGES (Front cover) Photograph of the Brewer Homestead, U.S. Patent No. 1146096. Photograph by Kim Stringfellow, 2008-2013. (Insert, left to right) Col. Moore's Tent – a popular Morongo Basin land locator, circa mid-1950. Courtesy of Twentynine Palms Historical Society. Installation view of the exhibition. Photograph by Nikolay Maslov. MLR Construction, Co. Inc Yucca Valley "Cabin Home" advertisement, circa 1950. (Back cover) Conzelman Homestead, U.S. Patent No. 1170083. Photograph by Kim Stringfellow, 2008-2013.

EVENTS ON SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 28

PANEL DISCUSSION 3-5 PM

Join artist Kim Stringfellow and artist Chris Carraher who lives in a Jackrabbit Homestead cabin, along with curator Tyler Stallings, to discuss the exhibition and history of the Small Tract Act.

Chris Carraher lives and works in a vintage homestead in Wonder Valley and has been in the Mojave Desert for over 20 years. The homestead cabins and the desert as both physical and metaphysical landscape have figured prominently in her artwork and her community and environmental activism. She co-directed the Wonder Valley Homestead Cabin Festival in 2008, a pivotal event in bringing the homesteads into community social, political, and aesthetic consciousness. She is currently completing The Queen of the World, a novel of the desert and the urge to disappear. www.magicgroove.net.

RECEPTION, 6-9 PM

Admission is free to both events

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JACKRABBIT HOMESTEAD

Tracing the Small Tract Act in the Southern California Landscape, 1938-2008, a project by Kim Stringfellow



Cabins in the Desert: Ruminating on Kim Stringfellow's Exploration of Jackrabbit Homesteads

By Tyler Stallings

Jackrabbit Homestead: Tracing the Small Tract Act in the Southern California Landscape, 1938-2008, a project by Kim Stringfellow explores the cultural legacy of the Small Tract Act in Southern California's Morongo Basin region near Joshua Tree National Park. "Beyond the proliferation of big box chains, car dealerships, fast food joints, and the nameless sprawl located along California State Highway 62 the desert opens up," as Stringfellow states in her book, whose title the exhibition adopted as its own. She goes on to write that "out there, just past Twentynine Palms, in an area called Wonder Valley, where signs of familiar habitation seem to fade from view, a variance appears in the landscape in the form of small, dusty cabins—mostly abandoned—scattered across the landscape. The curious presence of these structures indicates that you are entering one of the remaining communities of 'jackrabbit' homesteads left in the American West."

Stringfellow's detailed research about the history of the Small Tract Act can be found in the book. This exhibition consists of photographs, research materials, a web-based, multi-media presentation that features a downloadable car audio tour, and a to-scale layout in black tape on the gallery floor of one of the 400-square foot cabin floor plans called "The Nugget."

The mostly derelict homesteader cabins are the remaining physical evidence of former occupants who were some of the last to receive land from Uncle Sam for a nominal fee through the Small Tract Act of 1938. It was established when Pasadena-based Dr. Luckie suggested that World War I veterans, who were affected by poison gases during the conflict, for example, relocate to an arid climate for their health. However, it was not until the 1950s, after World War II, when there was a real land rush for the Small Tracts. People wanted to escape growing cities and their problems and, perhaps, wanted to experience one of the American, mythological dreams of "going West." After all, it was in the 1950s, when both western films and novels were at the height of their popularity, exemplified by television with the series *Bonanza*, by John Wayne films, and Louis

L'Amour's novels. These notions lent themselves to the Small Tract boosters too, especially by local municipalities that were motivated to increase homeowners in order to add to their tax base (a familiar story that continues to this day throughout the U.S.).

It was these abandoned structures that Stringfellow noted along Highway 62, north of Joshua Tree National Park, while driving through on vacations and doing projects around the Salton Sea area. She moved into a Joshua Tree (JT) home eventually, though not a jackrabbit homestead. Like the mid-century homesteaders, she was attracted by the solitude of the desert but, as an artist, she was also interested in being closer to a source of fascination for her: the built environment in arid regions.

She began to look into the history of the cabins, but discovered that a detailed account of the Small Tract Act was not evident. *Desert Magazine* would prove to be an invaluable resource, as it was one of the Act's original boosters, and is published still out of Palm Springs. She found, for example, that the Twentynine Palms Historical Society focused mainly on early homesteading from the 1860s to the 1920s when big tracts were dispersed by the federal government for agriculture or mining. In fact, there were once budding fields in the Eastern Mojave region in the early twentieth century, according to Stringfellow, but it was during an anomalous wet period. Nonetheless, despite the short time frame of optimal weather conditions, it provided fuel for the boosters to attract newcomers to a desert Eden in the West.

Subsequent to her research in the library stacks, she spent a year and a half in the field documenting the homestead cabins in Wonder Valley primarily. Many others had been destroyed by San Bernardino County that raised many of the cabins in the late 1990s and early 2000s. She mapped the cabins methodically by matching her GPS coordinates of cabins she found with the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) online database of Small Tract Act plot maps. An aspect of their roadside attraction is a combination of the cabins

being somewhat identical in size since most owners only cared to meet the minimal 400 square feet required for a structure to prove up the land, along with being placed at the center of their five-acre plots, for the most part. In other words, their seeming equidistance from one another suggests detailed planning, but as to why it would be done to such a degree in a desolate area would appear to be a mystery. But, of course, the answer comes from the BLM's steadfast method of overlaying a grid rectangles atop the landscape in order to "manage it," regardless of the terrain.

Many of the cabins were abandoned despite the ease of owning a piece of the West at less than \$200 (as there were fees involved). This response by their owners was due in part to the unexpected harshness of the desert and the lack of infrastructure that the counties were not interested in building to service the tracts, such as water, power, sewers, and roads. It was not until the 1950s and 60s that electricity was installed in some areas, although water still came from either drilling a well or having it delivered by truck. The original owners, or their inheritors, just left the structures to the elements then. Today, all that remains sometimes is the original concrete pad, which adds even more mystery for trekkers who come upon them, uninformed about the history of the area.

The abandoned cabins were like time capsules for Stringfellow. She was trespassing, technically, but then who was there to even notice. She would find, to her surprise, that domestic items, such as beds, tables, and dressers, were still present from the 1950s and 1960s, as if the occupants had left suddenly. Such scenes feed an apocalyptic imaginary in our culture; a pervading theme today in so many science fiction films, television series, and video games.

Lately, there has been a burgeoning movement of visual artists relocating to JT and the surrounding area along Highway 62 for the past ten to fifteen years. Several have obtained a homesteader cabin as part of their new beginning; due in part to affordability, along with being inspired by their unique regional history.

Their relocation is akin to the spirit of the Wild West—seeking to redefine oneself, access spiritual renewal, and perhaps discover a kind of utopia. Artist Andrea Zittel's establishment of *A-Z West* perhaps best exemplifies the move, as does her subsequent creation of "High Desert Test Sites," an annual art happening. Prior to Zittel's move, Noah Purifoy, an important Los Angeles installation artist, who co-founded Watts Tower Art Center in the 1960's, moved to the desert in 1989, and created a nearly three-acre, indescribable sculpture garden made from human detritus.

Stephanie Smith, a design architect who has taught at downtown L.A.'s Southern California Institute of Architecture (SciArc), created *Ecoshack* in 2003. She was attracted to sustainable design and green lifestyles so she transformed a homesteader cabin into a green design lab. She was interested in "how a dwelling can be small, close to the landscape, and handmade, yet be effective," as she states in one of the audio tracks on Stringfellow's audio tour of cabins visible from Highway 62. It is a downloadable MP3 so that people can listen to it in their own cars, and also features Zittel's words too. In a kind of reversal of Buckminster Fuller's pioneering dome design, which aimed to use the least amount of materials to create the most amount of usable interior space, Smith's work suggests to me the use of the least amount of materials—in this case a historic 20 x 20 foot homesteader cabin—in order to have not the most interior livable space, but to make the least impact on the landscape and to respect its "bigness," whereby its "exterior" to the "interior" of the cabin becomes part of one's living space too. In essence, the sky then becomes one's "dome."

Perhaps part of the significance of Stringfellow's project is that 75 years later, in 2013, since the creation of the Small Tract Act in 1938, "smallness" has had a resurgence with how to live. The inclination now is towards people living sustainably, lighter, freer, so that less land is occupied and abused. Perhaps there will be a new Wonder Valley land rush. Maybe readers will see new ads in *Desert Magazine*, which contain boosterish slogans that read, "Five acres! Your utopia!"