



Untitled (Citizen seeds, 2021), Kim Abeles
Courtesy Kim Abeles

WE WEAR THIS CITY

Since moving there in 1979, Kim Abeles has become a quintessential Los Angeles artist, expressing not so much the image of the city, but its spirit and potential.

Los Angeles has a lot of different reputations. Some know it as a place where dreams can come true, home of Hollywood and Beverly Hills, where everyone has a chance to be a star. Others know it as home to Skid row, the most notorious centre of poverty and homelessness in the United States. It is a surfer's paradise with 120 kilometres of pristine beaches and also a wildfire waiting to happen atop one of the world's most active fault lines. Of course the sun shines in LA seventy-five percent of the time. Yet, the city also has one of America's most persistent smog problems.

Numerous artists have made their careers concocting artworks that represent the complexities of this hard to define place. Mary Corse captures the perceptual phenomena of its shifting light; Young-Il Ahn expressed the colours reflected on the surface of its sea; Mark Bradford mines and maps its layered social and political structures. Other artists take inspiration from LA's glitz, its many cultures, its promise, its architecture, its signs, its natural environment and its many failures. None, however, has come closer to capturing the spirit of Los Angeles in their work than Kim Abeles. The word "spirit" comes from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning breath. Abeles's longest running body of work, her *Smog collectors*, literally uses the breath of Los Angeles as its medium.

Smog collectors

Abeles was born in 1952 in the suburbs of St Louis, then moved with her family to Pittsburgh. She earned her BFA from Ohio University then moved to Los Angeles in 1978 to earn her MFA from

University of California, Irvine. At that time, she recalls, studio space for artists downtown was still affordable, "about ten cents a square foot." She scored a large studio in the Victor Clothing Building, a historic mid-rise near Skid Row. "I lived there illegally, she says with a smile. Most people used their studios as day spaces, but I had a bed the size of my body." The vibe of downtown LA back then reminded Abeles of growing up back in Pittsburgh. "I loved it. That kind of gritty place. I guess it is like a Dickens thing, you know? I loved the people that were walking the streets, and trying to sell on the streets, and the hawkers trying to get you to come into their stores, and the overly loud music. I still love that, because I know that there is a life behind it."

During breaks from her studio work, Abeles got in the habit of going out on the building's fire escape, where she would stare off in the direction of the San Gabriel Mountains. She says, "I observed the mountains once on a clear day. That was in 1985. Then it took another

— Phillip Barcio



Dinner for two in one month of smog (2011), Kim Abeles

Courtesy Kim Abeles

year and two months to see them clearly again.” Abeles learned that smog, a form of pollution caused by fossil fuel pollution, was the culprit clouding her view. She had a realisation then that the smog always looked to her like it was far away, like it was always over there, at a distance — it never felt like it was right in front of her. But it had to be, she thought. It was everywhere.

She wondered how, as an artist to explain to an audience what she was experiencing — that effort to see something that was right in front of her, but which did not look like it was there at all. She had the idea to use the smog itself to make an image of what it was concealing. She made a stencil in the shape of the San Gabriel Mountains and attached the stencil to a panel of glass. She set the glass outside on the fire escape and allowed the smog, which is essentially an oil product, to collect on the glass for more than a month. The smog adhered to the surface, leaving behind an image of the mountains rendered in a grey film.

Abeles finished that first *Smog collector* in 1987. She enclosed it in a glass frame and sold it to a collector named Madeleine Grynsztejn, who was then in her 20s. Abeles figured the image would probably not last very long since it was made from such a fragile, experimental medium. “If we opened the glass frame, we could just wipe that thing away,” she says. But in 2023, when she reached out to Grynsztejn, who is now Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and inquired about borrowing the work for a survey of her *Smog collectors* at California State University in Fullerton, Abeles learned that it was still in perfect condition. Says Abeles, “I was so

grateful and thankful that they still had it and that it looked like the day I made it. Sometimes when collectors buy your work you do not really know what happens to it.”

In the 38 years since making that first one, Abeles has made *Smog collectors* on a range of different surfaces including fabric, porcelain

and clocks. She has used smog to create images of car parts and factory buildings. She made *Smog collectors* depicting food on plates arranged on a table, calling it *Dinner for two in one month of smog* (2011). One of her largest *Smog collectors* is a large-scale panorama titled *Sixty blocks square of Los Angeles horizon*

Museum hopping with Kim Abeles

Since moving to Los Angeles in 1978, Kim Abeles has seen almost everything about its art scene change. The biggest recent evolution is the rise of alternative exhibition spaces run by artists. She says, “I cannot even keep up with the alternative spaces that have opened. I think it adds energy, creative energy and gives people what they need. Artists need support systems.” There are, however, some things about LA that have not changed — namely what Abeles calls the city’s “stalwart institutions”. Her favourites are four spots huddled around Exposition Park downtown. Not only are they nestled close together near an accessible metro stop, and mostly free, but she says they go beyond hosting exhibitions to foster a sense of community for Angelenos.

California African American Museum (CAAM)

Founded in 1977 and formally opened in 1981, CAAM moved to its permanent location in Exposition Park, south of Downtown, in 1984. The 44,000-square-foot campus was designed by African American architects Jack Haywood and Vince Proby. Overseen by the California Natural Resources Agency, CAAM was the first African American museum fully supported by a state. Its collection includes more than 6,000 objects in addition to a reference library that includes more than 20,000 books.

California Science Centre

Consistently one of the ten most visited museums in the United States, California Science Centre is home to multiple aircraft and spacecraft, including the Mercury-Redstone 2, which carried the first great ape into space. It also houses an IMAX theatre.

Natural History Museum

Opened in 1913, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County claims to maintain a collection of around 35 million objects spanning 4.5 billion years of history. It includes permanent exhibitions covering the age of mammals, the age of dinosaurs and the origins of Los Angeles. The campus also includes a theatre, cafe and restaurants.

USC galleries

The University of Southern California, located right across the street from Exposition Park, is home to the Fisher Museum of art, which houses a substantial contemporary art collection, as well as the student galleries for the USC Roski School of Art and Design.



Kim Abeles
Photo Joyce Kim



Smog catcher II (Thirty days of smog, 1992), Kim Abeles
 Courtesy Kim Abeles

“I wondered, what is the art for? People already come here. They do not need this. So my thought was, why not try to encourage someone to go further. You know, like a life goal. The journey does not just stop at your comfort distance. Go further.”

— Kim Abeles

(*Seven days of smog*). Her most illustrious examples, perhaps, are her portraits of world leaders in smog. The *Presidential commemorative smog plates* portray eight American presidents, along with comments they made about industry or the environment. They were left out in the smog for different lengths of time depending on each President’s environmental record. Ronald Reagan’s is the darkest. That of his predecessor, Jimmy Carter, is one of the most faint. (Abeles continued that concept in 2019 with a series titled *World leaders in smog*, which portrays the portraits of leaders who gave speeches at climate summits between the years of 2011 and 2018, along with quotes from their speeches.)

Citizen seeds

Reflecting on her use of Los Angeles smog as a medium, Abeles says, “We wear the city. You know, you wear it. You are not just in it, it is part of who you are.” That idea is integral to another project Abeles recently completed, called *Citizen seeds*. It consists of six large-scale sculptures installed along the Park to Playa regional trail, a 21-kilometre urban nature trail stretching from the View Park-Windsor Hills neighbourhood to Playa Del Rey Beach near Los Angeles Airport. Each sculpture represents a seed that is native to the site where it is placed.

What initially concerned Abeles about the project is that the works were planned for a public nature

space that was already widely used. She says, “I wondered, what is the art for? People already come here. They do not need this. So my thought was, why not try to encourage someone to go further. You know, like a life goal. The journey does not just stop at your comfort distance. Go further.” To achieve this, she embedded markers in the surfaces of the seeds conveying information about the locale and the environment, along with indications of where they are in relation to the other seeds.

In one sense, she acknowledges that the idea of something that says “you are here” is obvious, something that is on every public marker. She says: “Well, of course, I am here. But I guess I am always wanting to emphasise to you that you are here, on Earth, on this trail, in this spot. I think we just forget that so often. We are ready to think about where we have been or where we are going to go. So there are things on the seeds that are about the journey, as well as the specifics of the geography of this place. Like, here is a freeway. Here is an outline of downtown Los Angeles. And you are right here, and here are the other ones.” There is little chance that anyone would be able to walk the entire length of the trail in one day, so they would have to make a point to come back again and again to see them all. “So they each give you a clue. They each give you encouragement,” Abeles says.

Each of the seeds weighs about 10 tonnes, and Abeles does not use fabricators. She learned new

metalwork techniques and how to work with terrazzo in order to make these sculptures. And her involvement did not end with their installation. She negotiated an agreement with the city so that she could be the one who does maintenance on the seeds. “I was going up there anyway,” Abeles jokes. “Public art is also different. At least the way I engage with it. I like to interact with people who are seeing it. When I go up there and do maintenance and somebody asks, why are you painting that, I love saying I made this. And they say no way, no you did not. And I say look, there is my signature. Here is my ID. They are not going to give me an award or anything. I just want them to know there is a person behind it.”

That impulse to let people know a human being made these seeds is not about ego, Abeles says. “I do not want to do work about myself. I am okay to hide behind the subjects.” She is not the subject of the work, she says. Neither are whatever plants the seeds represent. The viewers are the subject. She says it reminds her of a phrase used widely in immigration protests, attributed to Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulos: “They tried to bury us, they did not know we were seeds.” She adds “It is about perception. I am telling you that we can achieve something.” Again, Abeles is using the stuff that makes up Los Angeles as the medium in her work. Like the *Smog collectors* are made from the city’s breath, the seeds contain its potential.