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ARTS + CULTURE

Local Artist Cristopher Cichocki Provides a Glimpse Inside The Elemental

Cristopher Cichocki evolves the elements of ecology through light,
sound, and post-industrial debris.

May 28, 2025

Story by **Shana Dambrot**



An immersive array of light, painting, sculpture, and sound captured during Cristopher Cichocki's latest solo exhibition, Primordial Waters at The Elemental in Palm Springs.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LANCE GERBER

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For the better part of two decades, artist Cristopher Cichocki (pronounced cha-house-key) has been mining the dried-out seabeds and decaying infrastructures of the California desert — specifically the Coachella Valley and Salton Sea regions — gathering barnacles, emergency water canisters, misshapen fish skeletons, spiny succulents, and a variety of post-industrial debris to create a unique language of ecological elegy.

His latest exhibition, *Primordial Waters* at **The Elemental** in Palm Springs, was an interdisciplinary spectacle featuring paintings, sculpture, photography, projection, sound, and immersive environments, charting a conceptual narrative from prehistoric Paleozoic to futuristic fallout. (*Primordial Waters* closed in May, but Cichocki plans to mount a follow-up in October.)



Cristopher Cichocki stands in front of his painting "Salt/Earth #2," illuminated by UV light and glowing with phosphorescence, in his exhibition *Primordial Waters* at The Elemental.

PORTRAIT BY VICTOR GONZALEZ

The Elemental itself is a fascinating node in Cichocki's creative continuum. Founded in 2020 as a joint initiative between Cichocki and Catherine Dobler of Paris-based Fondation L'Accolade, where he was an artist in residence, the expansive space functions as a contemporary art center, residency hub, and conceptual think tank with a growing educational program for high schoolers called New Generation Arts. "I was that kid," Cichocki often says, referring to the desert youth who now benefit from mentorship opportunities with international artists and thinkers.

Cichocki's long-form, multiyear approach to artmaking often unfolds in chapters. He revisits sites of ecological, cultural, and geological significance — the Salton Sea, the mud pots, the San Andreas Fault (where he also ran an outdoor residency called Epicenter Projects) — relentlessly investigating the intersection of art, ecology, and material science.

Cristopher Cichocki - Primordial Waters | PALM SPRINGS LIFE

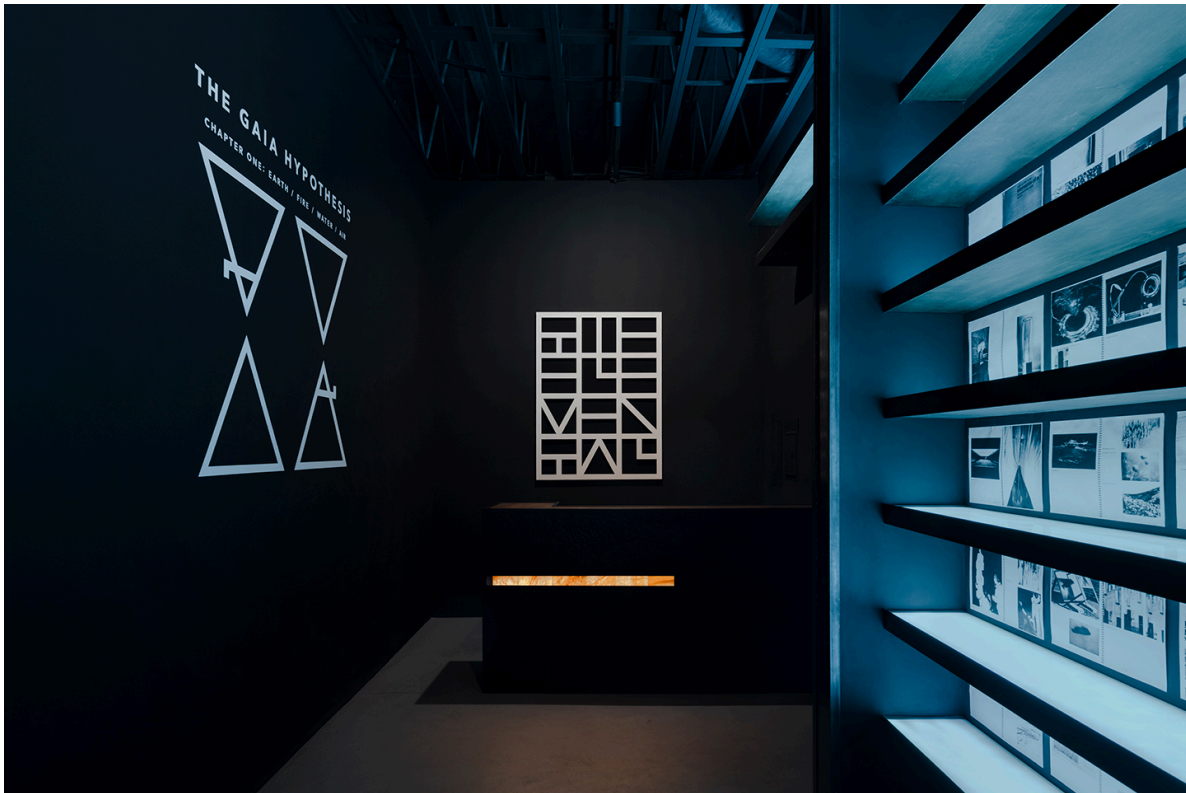


A CalArts graduate who relocated from Wisconsin to Palm Desert with his family at age 10, he speaks of the Coachella Valley not as *muse* but as *collaborator*. He culls organic materials, intervenes with studio artifice and technology, and presents his findings in exhibitions and performances at venues such as the **Palm Springs Art Museum** and **Lancaster Museum of Art & History** (MOAH). His resume reads like a circuit map of experimental festivals and alternative biennales, from Coachella festival's large-scale art program to Venice's Biennale Urbana, **São Paulo's Museum of Image & Sound**, Mexico City's Zona Maco, and locations closer to his Palm Springs home.

The Elemental's inaugural exhibition, *The Gaia Hypothesis – Chapter One: Earth, Fire, Water, Air* (2022), curated by Christopher Yggdre, celebrated lineages of influences and contemporaries, including Laura Grisi and Ana Mendieta, in dialogue with Cichocki's work. It explored the classical elements through James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis' 1970s theory that Earth behaves as a self-regulating organism.



Then, the group exhibition *The Gaia Hypothesis – Chapter Two: Palm Trees Also Die* (2023) examined sacred land stewardship through the lens of environmental collapse, with works addressing vanishing palm oases and the ancestral home of the Cahuilla people.



View of the entrance of the exhibition *The Gaia Hypothesis – Chapter One: Earth, Fire, Water, Air*.



Installation view of the exhibition *The Gaia Hypothesis – Chapter Two: Palm Trees Also Die*.



Series of photographs by Lance Gerber on view during the 2025 exhibition *Modern/Desert* at The Elemental.



Photography by Glen Wexler on view during the 2025 exhibition *Modern/Desert* at The Elemental.



Immersive video by artist Mona Kuhn during the 2025 exhibition *Modern/Desert* at The Elemental.

Primordial Waters is an evolving solo exhibition — overtly aquatic and lunar, in both material and poetic dimensions. He embraced not only the rippling blue Salton Seascape but also its hyper-salinated, post-human shimmer, encasing barnacles and debris from the shoreline in strangely alluring skins of chrome — sculptural works that read like relics of a lost civilization.

References to ancient and speculative technologies permeate the exhibition. Rusted Cold War emergency water canisters stamped “Property of the U.S. Government, 1953” rest alongside cinder blocks that evoke both brutalist fallout shelters and sacred desert architecture. Synthetic sand mingles with organic soil. Water, meant to save, instead seeps, rusts, and destroys. In his series *Evaporation Lines*, Cichocki renders old data-card topographies and patchwork grids in metallic watercolors, their surfaces catching light like liquid mercury. A cavernous black-light chamber cycles between daylight neutrals and hallucinogenic nocturnes, making the works appear to shape-shift under UV spectra. At their core, they remain abstract, cosmic, molecular — fractal inversions of neurons, root systems, and galactic clusters.

There’s a robust art historical lineage here, one that includes light and space artists like Mary Corse and [Lita Albuquerque](#), land art figures Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt, Vivian Suter’s canvas jungles, and Walter De Maria’s boxes of soil, bringing the vast terrain into human space and scale. Cichocki, too, brings the land inside — not only as material but as living, unpredictable systems. “We live not, in reality, on the summit of a solid earth, but at the bottom of an ocean of air,” he reminds us, citing Thales of Miletus’ prescient 600 B.C. observation on the intersection of natural science and human perception. Cichocki’s art translates that invisible connection into strikingly visible form.



Cichocki's *Fractal Traces* series of works on paper alongside his painting series *Evaporation Lines*, as seen in *Primordial Waters*.



His paintings and sculptural works embedded with sea salt, sand, and barnacles, as seen in *Primordial Waters*.



Black-light causes a resin-cast aloe vera installation to glow in *Primordial Waters*.

Beyond the objects in the show, *Primordial Waters* comes alive through time-based elements. Video projections mimic lunar surfaces and phosphorescent marine life. A live microscope laboratory captures barnacles growing and mutating in real time. Audiovisual performances activate the space with soundscapes and ritual interventions. A resin-cast, Day-Glo aloe vera installation nods to both psychedelic bioluminescence and the practical vernacular of desert survival — and recalls the gorgeous and alarming impact of Cichocki's earlier works.

Through The Elemental, Cichocki and Dobler have institutionalized their ethos. To date, more than 50 international artists have exhibited there, while high school mentees thread their own narratives into the desert's cultural tapestry. An annual residency program has brought practitioners like Sara Favriau, Marie-Luce Nadal, and Mona Kuhn into direct engagement with the region's ecology. An upcoming expansion promises additional exhibition and performance space.

There's a larger cosmology at work here — one where the desert is both graveyard and laboratory, where water is older than the sun, and where art might still function as witness and warning.

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