



Surfer, cult chef and land artist, Jim Denevan is still rocking the beach at 60. *Ajesh Patalay* meets the ultimate dude

Photography by *Peter Hinson*

It is early May. Jim Denevan – acclaimed land artist, roving chef and founder of the cult supper club known as Outstanding in the Field – is standing on one of his favourite beaches in California making an artwork specifically for the *FT*. Set beside the cliffs on San Gregorio State Beach in San Mateo County, the installation has already taken three days of painstaking work. It consists of hundreds of sculpted dunes of various sizes, each with an indentation at the top. Now in the early hours of the final day, Denevan is making the finishing touches – inserting a candle into each mound to create a vista of tiny makeshift lanterns. Except things aren't going to plan. The sea isn't behaving.

"We went out at 3.30am when the wind was going to be light enough [for the candles]," he reports. "Though most of the composition was beyond the reach of the tide, very high waves – higher than predicted – had erased some of the outer rings in the middle of the night. Fortunately the high waves created their own pattern that added to the composition." From aerial photographs taken at sunrise by Denevan's son Brighton, the scene looks like a distant galaxy of the Milky Way.

Denevan has always had an affinity with water. He grew up in San Jose, California, on the trail of the Guadalupe River. Aged nine, he learnt to surf. At his family beach house in Santa Cruz, he started surfing competitively as a teen. His skills earned him the moniker "King of Pleasure Point". By his early 20s, he was surfing three times a day: "Life was about how long I could lie on the beach in the afternoon between catching waves."

He's now 60, and says a day on the water for him is less about chasing the biggest and best waves than savouring the "profound peace" that comes with sitting around waiting. He looks less like a surfer than a rancher, standing tall at 6ft 4in and mostly to be found in a straw hat, checked shirt and cowboy boots – a "postmodern Marlboro Man" as one magazine described him. He hasn't lost his respect for the water. "Every day you are immersed," he says, "feeling the energy and power of the ocean, which crushes you. Even the smaller waves. That's what being a surfer is. The gentleness of seeing your friends, having those conversations. Then getting smashed by the waves, overcoming it, doing it again and trying not to wipe out."





## DENEVAN QUIT HIS JOB, HEADED TO THE BEACH AND STARTED DRAWING IN THE SAND. HE NEVER STOPPED

For some, the life of a champion surfer would have been enough. But when 24-year-old Denevan was scouted as a model and ended up in Milan, he welcomed the chance to broaden his horizons: “I didn’t want to be a model per se,” he admits, “but going to Italy, I knew I was going to see something besides these damn surfers.” The fashion world didn’t suit him. “People were congratulating me on being photogenic like I’d accomplished something,” he says. But he took pleasure in the food and drink (“I managed to sip the best coffee on earth”) and on returning home, he started working at farm-to-table pioneer Trattoria Primizia in Santa Cruz, where he later became head chef.

Life took a bitter turn. In the mid-1990s Denevan’s mother – a professor of mathematics at San José State – fell ill with Alzheimer’s. Three of his brothers had already been diagnosed with schizophrenia. The emotional stress of it all took its toll. Denevan quit his job, headed to the beach and started drawing in the sand with a stick. He never stopped. At first, he sketched whimsical figures like a 15ft fish. Later it became geometric shapes on a monumental scale: interlocking circles and cascading spirals done largely freehand over the course of hours. The process could be intense and physical but also “profoundly soothing and meditative”, he says.

Denevan has since become a globally recognised land artist. His work has been documented at MoMA PS1 and the Vancouver Biennale. Among his largest installations is a 18sq mile spiral of circles that he etched onto the frozen surface of Lake Baikal in Russia in 2010. Among his most recent is a work entitled *Angel of Repose*, comprising 364 sand pyramids in concentric circles at the centre of which singer Alicia Keys was photographed dancing at this year’s Desert X AIUla in Saudi Arabia.

Above: Jim Denevan’s land art at San Gregorio State Beach. Right: the artist at work. Below: one of Denevan’s Outstanding in the Field dinners at Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, California, in 2017



San Gregorio State Beach, the scene of his composition for the *FT*, has not only been the site of many previous artworks but also several dinners that Denevan has staged with Outstanding in the Field (OITF). Billed as “a restaurant without walls”, OITF organises banquets at locations where ingredients are sourced, whether in fields, orchards, vineyards or along the seashore. The purpose is to celebrate the farmers, fishermen and vintners whose produce is being consumed and to reconnect diners to the origins of their food. Since launching in 1999, OITF has thrown dinners in 19 countries around the world, everywhere from Mount Fuji to Byron Bay. This year it ventures to Africa for the first time with events in Ghana, Morocco and South Africa. When we speak, Denevan is gearing up for a 230-seat dinner on long tables along the pier at Huntington Beach, a famed surf spot near Los Angeles. “Crazy that we get permission to take over these unusual spaces,” he texts with a picture of OITF’s red-and-white 1953 tour bus parked at the end.

Alongside the farmers and guest chefs who take part – big names have included David Kinch, Marcus Samuelsson, Dan Barber and Anne Quatrano – Denevan brings his own idiosyncratic vibe to events. “He’s got this surfer-dude, internal-calm thing going on that is totally real,” says frequent collaborator chef Jason Weiner. “I’ve never seen him ruffled. He has confidence and charisma and brings you along with him through sheer force of his personality.” He is also known to break into improvised song at dinners and throw people up in the air and catch them for fun. “Anyone that is under 200lbs,” Denevan notes. “Men and women, I’m not discriminating. I look at them, judge [their weight] and throw them up like a sack of potatoes. Anyone under 150lbs I can get pretty high.” He adds: “I’m a little shy and sensitive. I overcompensate.”

The first dinner he cooked on San Gregorio in 2005 was for 100 people inside a giant sea cave. “It seemed impossible and unusual enough to bring attention to the event,” he recalls. He didn’t have official permits and in the weeks leading up to the dinner, he recalls, “the cave filled with sand and I had to go out with a small bulldozer at two o’clock in the morning [to dig it out]”. He is planning to reoccupy the spot for another dinner in October (this time with permits). He is also returning to the UK for the first time in a decade for two dinners at Lower Town Farm in Halwill near the Devon/Cornwall border (on 10 July) and Sitopia Farm in southeast London (on 16 July), where Sarit Packer and Itamar Srulovich from Honey & Co will be guest chefs.

“People come to our dinners and are not absolutely certain what is going to take place,” says Denevan. “They may come away disappointed or find it a transcendent experience.” He prides himself on the adventurousness of the events. At one dinner near Seattle, he even situated the kitchen where the tides come in, so the chefs ended up knee-deep in seawater. The weather plays a part, too: “We’ve had events with 45mph winds in the desert. And one on a clifftop in Big Sur where the fog rose to cover the table and disappeared a few courses later; the reveal was one of the most powerful events ever. I like to create situations where people are presented with an environment and it’s not really complete until they participate.”

Ahead of the Halwill dinner, Denevan plans to issue an open call for diners to join him on a Cornish beach to create a work of art together. He will sketch out the area in the sand and guests will, as it were, colour it in with rakes. Pictures of the final composition will be made available, but its temporary nature and certain obliteration by the Atlantic waves is key to the work. “With each artwork, I am creating a temporary place,” he says. “The place didn’t exist in the morning and it doesn’t exist after the tides come in.” As Denevan puts it: “Water transforms everywhere.” Therein lies its power. ■ **HTSI**  
[outstandinginthefield.com](http://outstandinginthefield.com)

