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ICONS

Artists Explore New Ways of Sculpting the Land

New exhibitions at the Nevada Museum of Art spotlight the state's central role in the evolving land art movement



A photograph by Gianfranco Gorgoni of 'Seven Magic Mountains' by Ugo Rondinone, a 2016 land art work near Las Vegas.

PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPH © ESTATE OF GIANFRANCO GORGONI; ARTWORK © UGO RONDINONE

By Susan Delson

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In 1969, a young artist named Michael Heizer headed into the Nevada desert 80 miles northeast of Las Vegas and cut a pair of trenches into a mesa, running 50 feet deep, 30 feet wide and a combined 1,500 feet long. Monumental enough to be seen in satellite photographs, “Double Negative” quickly became an icon in the emerging field of land art —art that uses land itself as its material, by marking, sculpting or otherwise intervening in the landscape.

Half a century on, land art is changing. For one thing, it's no longer the exclusive domain of male artists from New York, “talking tough and driving bulldozers” to make “geometric, minimalist gestures in the desert,” said William Fox, director of the Center for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno. Contemporary artists tend to favor less intrusive approaches, Mr. Fox said, often addressing what he called “real-

world, real-time concerns.” And they’re more likely to be women and people of color, including indigenous artists.

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This summer, the Nevada Museum of Art is presenting five exhibitions exploring diverse aspects of land art, from iconic beginnings to new interpretations. The state has been home to 15 or more important works of land art, some of them now gone. “We’re acknowledging these major earthworks in our backyard,” said the museum’s senior curator and deputy director Ann M. Wolfe. “But at the same time we’re asking: Who are the artists who’ve been left out of the land art narrative, and who are the artists shaping the future of the field?”

As a starting point, “Gianfranco Gorgoni: Land Art Photographs” presents images by one of the first land art photographers, who was “on the ground when those pieces were being created in the 1960s and ’70s,” Ms. Wolfe noted. In 2015-16, Mr. Gorgoni returned to Nevada as the official photographer for “Seven Magic Mountains” (2016), a work by Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone that was commissioned by the museum and the New York-based Art Production Fund. Located 10 miles south of Las Vegas, “Seven Magic Mountains” is visited by about a thousand people a day, said Ms. Wolfe, drawn by its syncopated shapes and Vegas-inspired neon colors.

A model of “Seven Magic Mountains” is among the first works on view in “Land Art: Expanding the Atlas.” Grouped under broad themes like Ground, Water, Space and Ruin, some 80 works by close to 50 artists trace an alternate history of the field, proposing different definitions of what land art might be.



Justin Favela's 'Family Fiesta: Double Negative' (2015) staged a pop-up party at the site of a 1969 land art work by Michael Heizer.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST © JUSTIN FAVELA. PHOTO CREDIT: MIKAYLA WHITMORE

Northern California artists Daniel McCormick and Mary O'Brien, for instance, specialize in watershed restoration and erosion control, working with woven basket forms that become part of the environment. Aboriginal Australian artist Reko Rennie uses an early land art technique—inscribing the terrain with tire-track circles—for a different purpose, reclaiming traditional territory on behalf of his people. And in the video "Family Fiesta: Double Negative" (2015), Justin Favela wryly critiques Mr. Heizer's pioneering earthwork by staging a pop-up party at the site, filling its minimalist void with color, camaraderie and Mexican *banda* music. "Great acoustics," he later noted.

For artist Rose B. Simpson of Santa Clara Pueblo, N.M., land art was an important context for the quartet of outsize female clay figures, called "Groundbeings," that anchor the exhibition "Rose B. Simpson: The Four." "It's as if they're emerging from or descending into the earth," said contemporary art curator JoAnne Northrup. A fourth exhibition spotlights High Desert Test Sites, an arts organization co-founded by artist Andrea Zittel in 2002 that stages events in desert locations, ranging from "experimental music to ephemeral structures to performances and happenings," Ms. Wolfe said.

All four shows are currently on view. On Aug. 28 they will be joined by "Judy Chicago: Dry Ice, Smoke, and Fireworks Archive," which focuses on a less-known aspect of the celebrated artist's work: a series of performances, called "Atmospheres," that Ms. Chicago initiated in 1968 in response to the monumental land art of that era.

Staged in the deserts where those massive interventions were taking place, the Atmospheres used ephemeral materials like smoke, fireworks and dry ice to "feminize the

landscape,” as Ms. Chicago put it. The exhibition includes large-scale photographs, videos and documentation of these performances, which the artist continues to create—including one in New Mexico last weekend, just before her 82nd birthday. Releasing colored smoke into the air, she has observed, “softened everything.”

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