ENVIROMENTAL ART

Hejira in a Jetta

Mary Parrish

In the summer of 2004, city slicker and "recovering art historian" Erin Hogan jumped—short "urban haircut," titanium German designer glasses, and all—into her black Volkswagen Jetta to search for meaning in land art of the western United States. Three weeks away from the el trains, straight edges, and cacophony of Chicago were a challenge for Hogan (now the public affairs director for the Art Institute of Chicago). Blending a humorous travelogue and serious musings, in Spiral Jetta she winds her car and the reader through the complexities of contemporary aesthetics via a varied landscape of people, places, and art.

Land artists took their work out of museums and galleries to integrate it with the geological settings of some of the most remote areas in the United States. Their creations merge art with the natural world, harnessing an ever-changing mixed media of available light, shadow, color, mud, rock, and possibly manmade materials. The monumental forms absorb inevitable and happenstance changes (such as salt accretion and erosion), which become integral parts of the works. (Some land artists made provisions to preserve their works’ original forms, and dozens are still unfinished.)

Hogan loves land art but nonetheless wrestles with its implications. She wonders, "Would Roden Crater offer a radically different experience than one could have, say, attentively camping?" At one point, she openly declares, "Everything I had seen so far bordered on the preposterous." She asks whether art is, as Dadaist Marcel Duchamp asserted, whatever we say it is.

In the high desert of western New Mexico, Hogan finds the aesthetic experience she had hoped to encounter. She beautifully describes the effects—seen especially at sunrise and sunset—of color, light, and shadow on the 400 carefully constructed stainless steel poles that form De Maria’s 1-mile-by-1-km Lightning Field. That work, at least for a few moments, turned off the critic in the author while she stood in awe of the art.

References

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This monograph comprises two essays on Walter De Maria’s 1977 masterpiece by the San Francisco Chronicle’s art critic. The first—written for the Dia Art Foundation (which financed and owns The Lightning Field) in 1978 but abandoned after the esoteric and highly reclusive artist found it too descriptive—is presented as a “period artifact.” Beginning in 1994, Baker returned to the site four times, in different seasons, to deepen his experience of the work. He finished a second manuscript in the summer of 2001, but 9/11 and its aftermath led to substantial revisions. The result is a sobering collection of reflections thematically linked to Baker’s personal reactions to “one of the profoundest of American artworks.”

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