ENVIRONMENTAL ART

Hejira in a Jetta

Mary Parrish

I

n 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 1970s earthworks and contemporary aesthetics via a varied landscape of people, places, and art.

Great Salt Lake near Rozel Point, Utah. When the artist Robert Smithson “went looking for red” in the late 1960s, he found it there. Due to the lack of fresh water and the presence of salt-tolerant red algae and bacteria, the lake was then “bleeding scarlet streaks … pumping into ruby currents … a flaming chromosphere (1). On the site, Smithson built his 1500-feet-by-15-feet Spiral Jetty (1970).

After viewing Spiral Jetty, the author travels to Michael Heizer’s Double Negative (1970) and Walter De Maria’s Lightning Field (1977). Along the way, she tries to visit Nancy Holt’s Sun Tunnels (1976) and James Turrell’s still unfinished Roden Crater (1972—), but fails to find either. She also describes her reactions to the geology of Arches National Park in Utah; the nearby tourist attraction Hole n’ the Rock (a 5000-square-foot house

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 discussions concerning the conservation of other pieces is ongoing.)

Hogan’s first destination is the salt flats of Great Salt Lake near Rozel Point, Utah. When the artist Robert Smithson “went looking for red” in the late 1960s, he found it there. Due to the lack of fresh water and the presence of salt-tolerant red algae and bacteria, the lake was then “bleeding scarlet streaks … pumping into ruby currents … a flaming chromosphere (1). On the site, Smithson built his 1500-feet-by-15-feet Spiral Jetty (1970).

After viewing Spiral Jetty, the author travels to Michael Heizer’s Double Negative (1970) and Walter De Maria’s Lightning Field (1977). Along the way, she tries to visit Nancy Holt’s Sun Tunnels (1976) and James Turrell’s still unfinished Roden Crater (1972—), but fails to find either. She also describes her reactions to the geology of Arches National Park in Utah; the nearby tourist attraction Hole n’ the Rock (a 5000-square-foot house

Hogan’s first destination is the salt flats of Great Salt Lake near Rozel Point, Utah. When the artist Robert Smithson “went looking for red” in the late 1960s, he found it there. Due to the lack of fresh water and the presence of salt-tolerant red algae and bacteria, the lake was then “bleeding scarlet streaks … pumping into ruby currents … a flaming chromosphere (1). On the site, Smithson built his 1500-feet-by-15-feet Spiral Jetty (1970).

After viewing Spiral Jetty, the author travels to Michael Heizer’s Double Negative (1970) and Walter De Maria’s Lightning Field (1977). Along the way, she tries to visit Nancy Holt’s Sun Tunnels (1976) and James Turrell’s still unfinished Roden Crater (1972—), but fails to find either. She also describes her reactions to the geology of Arches National Park in Utah; the nearby tourist attraction Hole n’ the Rock (a 5000-square-foot house

Spiral Jetty in 2005. The lake level and algae populations have fluctuated since Smithson constructed the work.

References

The reviewer is at the Department of Paleobiology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20013–7012, USA. E-mail: parrishm@si.edu


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.”

—Mary Parrish
Browsings
Mary Parrish

Science 322 (5909), 1791.
DOI: 10.1126/science.322.5909.1791b