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

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

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 artist-taxidermist Albert Christensen dug into a huge rock between 1945 and 1957); the “dream” and “nightmare” of the bordertown of Juárez, Chihuahua; and Donald Judd’s Chinati galleries in Marfa, Texas.

In between her accounts of getting lost, drinking cheap beer in cowboy bars with local characters, and other misadventures along the road, Hogan integrates the heady philosophies of a number of modern and contemporary artists and art critics (including Barnett Newman, Michael Kimmelman, and Michael Fried) as well as her own thoughts and impressions. She is great at keeping the reader’s attention: two pages of art philosophy; ten pages of fun.

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.

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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.”

—Mary Parrish
Editor's Summary

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