

Sited and Situated: A Brief Account of Art Places in Texas

ART LIES
A Contemporary Art Journal

TX★11
TEXAS BIENNIAL

In recent iterations of the Texas Biennial, the exhibition's organizers have sought to broaden the exhibiting venues beyond white-wall galleries, and the artwork presented beyond objects easily contained in such "neutral" spaces. In 2007, the Biennial solicited and selected proposals for eight original and temporary installations, half of them housed in PODS® and the rest sited directly on the neighboring grounds at "Site 1808," a field alongside East Cesar Chavez Street in Austin. In 2009, Biennial curator Michael Duncan commissioned, in concert with the City of Austin's Art in Public Places and Risa Puleo, Assistant Curator at the Blanton Museum of Art, seven temporary outdoor projects near or around the banks of Lady Bird Lake. Making the Biennial more public, these "site-specific" artworks also significantly extended the biennial's representation of artistic production occurring within the state.

Continuing this trend with an expansive twist, 2011 Biennial Curator Virginia Rutledge invited five recently completed or in-process Texas-sited projects to be part of this year's exhibition. These works are Margarita Cabrera's Mexico Abre la Boca (2011) in Austin, Houston and other forthcoming locations; Mary Ellen Carroll's prototype 180 (2010–present) in Sharpstown, Houston; Trenton Doyle Hancock's From a Legend to a Choir (2009) at Cowboys Stadium, Arlington; Annette Lawrence's Coin Toss (2009), also at Cowboys Stadium; and James Magee's extraordinary work known as The Hill (ongoing), in Cornudas. Each project engages natural, architectural or social landscapes particular to Texas.

These inclusions further Rutledge's "distributed" Biennial model in which she has augmented the juried open-submission process by designating nonprofit spaces, shows and artworks across Texas as part of the exhibition. Making the most of a limited budget, she has annexed major works by internationally recognized artists (who otherwise did not respond to the open call). Again, the Texas Biennial acknowledges another facet of art connected to the state, reflecting not only on artistic possibilities but also the landscape specifically engaged.

We invited University of Texas Professor Richard Brettell, no stranger to the state's artistic treasures, to address this dimension of the Biennial. In the following contribution, Dr. Brettell foregrounds Rutledge's selection with a personal account of art places in Texas. Looking back nearly forty years, his recollection establishes a prehistory to recent site-responsive practices while making clear that embracing such projects (both as viewers and scholars) is necessary to any understanding of Texas art.—KM

My wife and I first drove into Texas by crossing the great State Line Avenue in Texarkana in August of 1976. We had all of our earthly possessions in an old red VW Beetle with no air conditioning, and it was as hot as hell. We were moving from a seventeenth-century thatched cottage in Old Marsden outside Oxford, England, to an unseen 1960s apartment in downtown Austin found for us by Ken Prescott, chair of the Department of Art at the University of Texas, and we were incredibly excited. I was going to be an assistant professor of Modern art at UT's art school. It was odd to me, however, and potentially challenging that art history was not its own department but, instead, was part of the art department in the university's College of Fine Arts. I already knew the department was on the opposite side of campus from all the things that mattered to me—the library, the rare book library, the university art collections and the humanities departments.

The first person I met on campus was painter and printmaker Ken Hale, also then an assistant professor, working in the air-conditioned splendor of his new lithography studio. The next day I met some art historians, but the most memorable person I met in that first week was the photographer Garry Winogrand, who was teaching then at the university and who, after I earnestly asked about the places to see great art in Texas, told me, "Rick, you don't come to Texas for great art. You come for great life." I knew then that it would be a wild ride.

I took Garry's pithy advice seriously by driving throughout the state in the four years my wife and I lived in Austin—visiting small towns, ranching communities, cities and landscapes, meeting the families of my students, reading the *WPA Guide to Texas*, following the travels of Frederick Law Olmsted in his antebellum trip through the state, etc. And although, unlike Garry, I was actually impressed with Texas' art museums and private collections (the Kimbell was brand new, and the Menil had not yet been built), I was, true to his comments, more impressed by its diverse and vibrant culture and its independent streak. As a Coloradan, I was totally blown away by the state's diversity—culturally and geographically—and I well remember the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio.

Little did I know that in the same year we arrived in Texas, Donald Judd bought the first of two ranches outside of distant Marfa and began to conceive of his extraordinarily ambitious series of installations now maintained by the Chinati Foundation. Indeed, the only "site-specific" works of art that I heard about in those years were in major cities. The Rothko Chapel and the Beer Can House in Houston (a juxtaposition of types of "art" possible only in Texas) topped the list for me.

Fast-forward a year: I remember sitting at dinner in the home of the great medievalist art historian at UT, Eleanor Greenhill (who grew up in the Panhandle, received her doctorate at the University of Munich and taught first at the University of Chicago). On the wall of her dining room, behind Eleanor as she sat at the head of the table, was an extraordinary “halo,” which was actually a huge framed sheet of paper on which appeared what can only be called a gilded blotch. (The sheer idea of this was extraordinary to me because a blotch is only possible as the result of a sudden gesture with liquid, while gilding is only possible with pure, dry surfaces.) I was fascinated by it, and she told me about its maker, the artist Michael Tracy. Michael was then about to leave Houston for the tiny early-nineteenth-century border town of San Ygnacio, where he moved definitively in 1978. But before he did we began a lively correspondence that resulted in my coming to know the first truly sublime and original site-specific work of art I had ever encountered.

Michael was so fascinated by the renewed responses to his work in the late 1970s in Austin (where he had taken classes as an undergraduate) that he had rented (or squatted in) a small, abandoned two-story building on East Sixth Street and had spent a considerable amount of time filling the entire building with art installations (without saying anything about it to anyone). He gave a set of keys to Eleanor Greenhill and me and left town. I will never forget going down to the building for the first time with no sense of what I would see and opening the door to discover a room-by-room installation of his extraordinary “faux-religious” art with piles and vases of flowers lit by votive and large-scale candles. (Thank God the Austin fire marshal never knew about it.) I can’t remember how long the installation was there—perhaps a month, perhaps two weeks—but it was gone one day as quickly as it appeared, and I never saw a photograph of it or read a mention of it in print. It was an installation created specifically for its site, but unlike most works of art that are site-specific, it was always intended to be temporary—more like a stage set for a short-run performance of private viewing than a permanent work of art.

It was the expression of a deeply felt and emotional meditation by an artist from the Midwest on the cultural situation of Texas. Michael had come to the state and taken classes in medieval art and architecture from Professor Greenhill. In 1977–78 he began to respond more powerfully than any non-Hispanic artist I know to the deepest cultural conditions of Texas—its border status. It was this status that led him eventually to the border itself and, while there, gradually to Mexico City, Guanajuato and beyond. For the Michael Tracy of this extraordinary installation, Texas was part of an immense series of interlinked—borderless—landscapes with

cultural roots in pre-Hispanic times and whose modern status as a U.S. state was less important to its identity than its participation in this larger—and far deeper—cultural terrain.

The Sixth Street installation coincided with the beginning of Tracy’s gradual restoration and installation of the earliest adobe buildings in San Ygnacio. It was also at this time that Tracy started collaborating with James Magee, which, in turn, played an important part in that artist’s decision to buy land of his own in Cornudas in far West Texas for his ever-evolving work of art called *The Hill* (about which I have written extensively elsewhere).¹ Indeed, the 1980s were what one might call the “Golden Age” of artist-designed places in Texas. Not only was Tracy working on his San Ygnacio complex and his series of performances on the border, and not only was Jim Magee beginning construction of the four buildings at *The Hill*, and not only was Donald Judd pulling his Marfa installations together, but also James Surls and, later, Bert Long were creating their own environments in the woods of Splendora, north of Houston, where Surls moved in 1977. San Ygnacio, *The Hill*, Marfa and Splendora were essentially “artist sites” in which the landscape and indigenous architecture were adapted by artists as both places to live and work, as well as sites for performance, entertainment and art viewing.

Michael Tracy formalized this practice with a few friends by creating the River Pierce Foundation, which exists to this day and which, according to its website, sponsors historical preservation, tours, performances and publications devoted to the border.² The performances by Tracy and Magee in and along the Rio Grande in the 1980s were extraordinary, rooted perhaps in Tracy’s own Galveston performance of 1979, *Sacrifice I: The Sugar*. Tracy and Magee’s collaborative work combined an almost operatic mythological structure with modernity—forklifts, cars, cranes, docking machinery, boats, etc., all used by variously costumed people instructed to perform certain functions. Tracy had his performances documented in film—in the case of *Sacrifice I: The Sugar* by his friend William Glad. Surls too sought to document his years in Splendora with an exhibition, book and a series of films produced in collaboration with curator and museum director Terrie Sultan.³

This idea of a non-urban artist utopia, which has such an important history in American art, also finds expression in Harry Geffert’s home, studio and land in Crowley, south of Fort Worth, and in the strip shopping centers appropriated by the Good/Bad Art Collective in Denton or any of a number of artist places in and around Austin. Together with the works of urban “street and park art”—such as Willard “The Texas Kid” Watson’s famed and now lamented front yard in north Dallas or Bert Long’s commissioned

works in the parks of the Fifth Ward in Houston—these “art places,” though unprotected by statute or ownership, are so numerous in Texas that they constitute an important substructure of the state’s diverse art world. They have never been discussed or documented as a group, and information about them is scattered and difficult to access. This is particularly tragic since many of them—Surls’ Splendor or The Texas Kid’s yard as cases in point—have been abandoned and no longer survive except in various recordings, photographs, films and memories.

(I worry the same fate awaits Tracy’s complex at San Ygnacio.)

A short discussion of non-institutionalized art places in Texas could never be complete without at least a mention of *Cadillac Ranch* (1974, moved 1997) near Amarillo. A project of the famed (and well-documented) Ant Farm collective, or “art agency,” which was based partly out of Houston, the *Ranch* was instigated and financed by the eccentric millionaire Stanley Marsh 3. It is, in many ways, the most famous (or infamous), most often reproduced and most visited (in its relatively accessible second home along Interstate 40 west of Amarillo) artist place in Texas other than Judd’s Marfa installations. Indeed, unlike Judd’s Chinati, *Cadillac Ranch* has entered the realm of popular culture, approaching Clement Greenberg’s notion of kitsch with its cheerful critique of capitalist excess equally appreciated by truckers, bikers and the “art world.” In this way, it is as much a contrast with Judd’s aesthetic as the Beer Can House is with the Rothko Chapel. But as an artist place it pales in significance when compared with Stanley Marsh 3’s recent landscape installation, *Floating Mesa* (date unknown), also in the desert landscape directly west of Amarillo. Here, Marsh created a vast planar “fence” of white-painted plywood sheets that rings a vast mesa below its flat top. In the right light (a white sky) the fence creates the illusion of the mesa’s top slab floating above a stripe of sky. With no labels or road signs (or website), it is a work of art that simply appears as one drives along a two-lane paved road outside of Amarillo. It is poetic and subtle without pretense. Viewers, or those fortunate to happen upon it, are forced to conclude that it is a work of art without anyone telling them so.

My late friend Garry Winogrand preferred the rodeos, high-school football games, chili competitions, used-car lots, barbeque joints and motorcycle clubs of Texas—in short, Texas L-I-F-E—to the art places just described. Surely this is too bad. Had someone with a compelling and talented visual sensibility chosen to document these site-specific works in their heyday, we would know a good deal more about them than we do, and all of them would survive in a comprehensible form for future generations. Now, although some are protected and recorded, most are not and will disappear without a trace, like Michael Tracy’s short-lived Sixth

Street installation in Austin. Of the major Texas cities, Houston is the only one with a sufficient degree of critical and historical discourse, as developed by its institutions, to provide fertile ground for the documentation and preservation of such places within and around that city. The rest of us are too busy producing culture to also worry about documenting, recording and preserving what has already been produced and especially what has been left to be forgotten. Our collecting institutions, with their global aspirations, are not sufficiently interested in local artistic culture either to collect and display it intelligently or to provide archival and documentation support, such that the best and most ambitious of it can nurture future generations of artists in Texas.

Richard R. Brettell is Margaret McDermott Distinguished Chair of Art and Aesthetics at The University of Texas at Dallas.

1. See Richard R. Brettell and Jed Morse, *James Magee: The Hill* (New York: Prestel USA, 2010).
2. See www.riverpierce.org.
3. See Terrie Sultan, Ed., *James Surls: The Splendor Years, 1977–1997* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005) and www.jamessurls.coe.uh.edu/access.htm.