

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Randy Kennedy, "Building an Artist's 'Magic Mountains' to Draw Visitors to the Desert,"
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ART & DESIGN

Building an Artist's 'Magic Mountains' to Draw Visitors to the Desert



"Seven Magic Mountains" by Ugo Rondinone near Jean, Nev. Isaac Brekken for The New York Times

JEAN, NEV. — The vast desert around this tiny road-stop town has tantalized artists for at least a couple thousand years. Ancient petroglyphs of lizards and unidentifiable creatures dot canyon walls to the northeast. In 1962, Jean Tinguely staged "Study for An End of the World, No. 2," in which he detonated junk sculptures with explosives that he and Niki de Saint Phalle had carefully assembled in their room at the Flamingo hotel in Las Vegas, up the road. And six years later, Michael Heizer created one of his first earth works here, a zigzag trench incised like an abstract painting into the surface of a dry lake bed.

The other day, looking from a great distance on Interstate 15 toward the same lake bed, a few pinpoint points of brightness were visible, neon anomalies against the dun-colored scrubland. Upon approach, the points quickly grew bigger, brighter, weirder, like a roadside attraction made by

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an atomically enlarged infant — seven totem-pole stacks of limestone boulders, the rocks painted in Kool-Aid shades so intense they were sometimes hard to look at in the full sunlight.

“Stacking stones is such a universal impulse, an activity that has gone on around the world as long as humans have been here,” said the Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone, climbing from a sport utility vehicle to see for the first time the project he had been working on for more than five years, “Seven Magic Mountains,” his largest public art installation and one of the most ambitious pieces of his career.



Jean Tinguely with his “Study for an End of the World, No. 2,” in which he detonated junk sculptures with explosives in 1962. Allan Grant/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Getty Images

The work, which officially went on view May 11, is one of the largest land-art pieces created in the United States in the last 40 years, in a part of the West that defined the land-art movement beginning in the 1960s with artists like Mr. Heizer, Robert Smithson (“Spiral Jetty” in Utah), Nancy Holt (“Sun Tunnels,” west of the Bonneville Salt Flats) and Walter de Maria (“The Lightning Field” in western New Mexico).

Mr. Rondinone’s desert intervention also serves as a case study for how some young contemporary-art museums in smaller cities — in this instance the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, which oversaw the work’s creation along with the Art Production Fund, the New York

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public-art organization — are trying to think outside the cookie-cutter approach to developing a program and a reputation at a time when art prices have made building a large, diverse collection almost a fool’s game. Over the last eight years, the Nevada Museum — which was founded in 1931 but became a fully functioning institution only in the 1970s — has increasingly staked its future on becoming known for its expertise and holdings in materials related to art and the land, not just in the United States but around the world.

Building on a renowned collection of photographs by artists like Robert Adams and Edward Burtynsky who have charted humanity’s impact on the land beginning in the late 20th century, the museum founded the Center for Art and Environment in 2008, devoted to what it calls “creative interactions between people and their environments.” The center is home to a rapidly growing archive, now one of the largest in the world, committed to land art, very broadly defined. And with the Rondinone project, the museum is now moving past exhibiting photographs, documentation and artifacts from historical land-art pieces and decisively entering the business of ushering new pieces into the world.

“I saw no reason when I came here in 2007 to strive to make this into an encyclopedic museum or one that would have a general collecting focus,” said David B. Walker, the museum’s executive director and chief executive, who came to the job after past lives as an academic dean, an art-magazine publisher and the singer and guitarist in two California rock bands. “Or you could also go down the easy, convention-center path — taking these big flashy traveling shows and drawing big crowds to those and making a lot of people happy without much to show for it.”



Ugo Rondinone with part of his new work, “Seven Magic Mountains”
Isaac Brekken for The New York Times

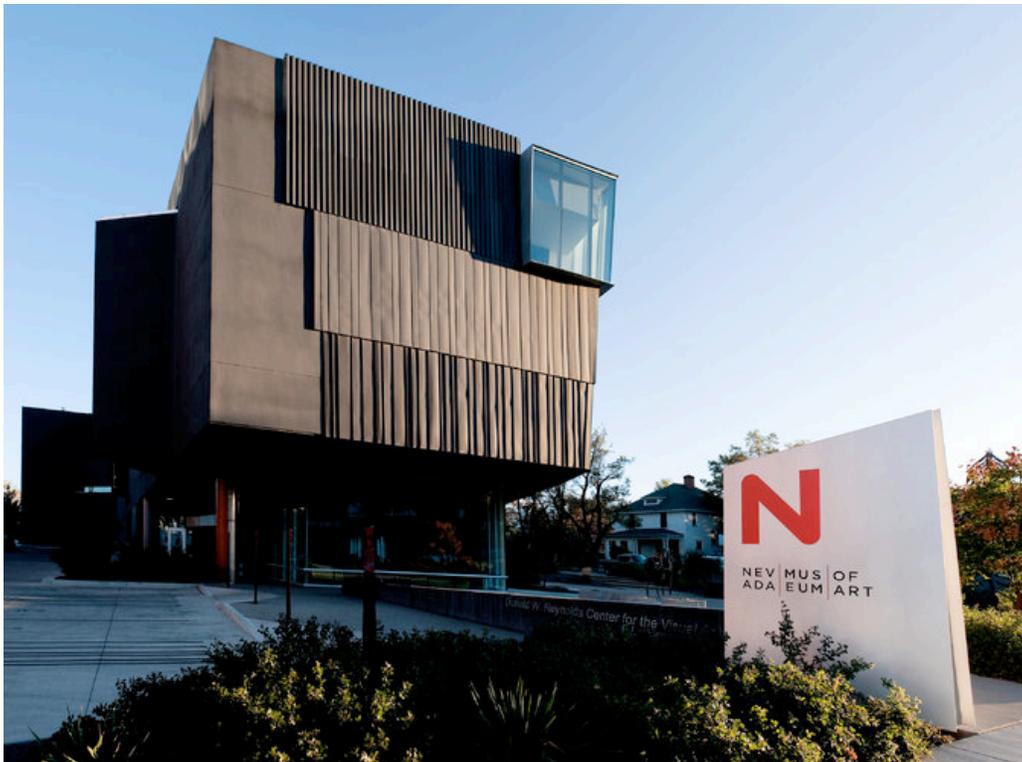
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Quoting a McKinsey consultant he once heard (who was probably paraphrasing a piece of life advice often attributed to Jerry Garcia), Mr. Walker said it became apparent to him that in the 21st century, places like his would lose in the game of trying to make themselves smaller versions of large, wealthy urban museums and that the way to succeed was not to try being the best at what you did “but to be the only one who does what you do.”

Of course, institutions like the Dia Art Foundation in New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art have long-established histories with land art. But Mr. Walker and his curators, including William L. Fox, a poet and historian of land art who runs the Center for Art and Environment, believe that the museum, in its city perched on the western edge of the Great Basin, is a logical home for such a focus and can distinguish itself by delving deeper than larger establishments are likely to do.

The mission has already begun to pay off in support, not only from the growing wealth in and around Reno (the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center, outside the city, has become the largest industrial park in the country, landing gargantuan operations of companies like Tesla and Switch with favorable tax laws) but also increasingly from outside Nevada.

“It feels very good when you can come back from L.A. with a half-million-dollar check for a project in Nevada that’s really pretty out there,” said Mr. Walker in his office at the museum, an angular black zinc-clad building completed in 2003 on the site of the institution’s modest former home, a repurposed title company building.



The Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, which oversaw the creation of “Seven Magic Mountains.”
Jamie Kingham, via Nevada Museum of Art

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The Rondinone project, which the artist describes in a poetic written statement of purpose as partly about “the contrary air between the desert and the city lights” and the solidarities between “the natural and the artificial,” is in many ways a fitting first flag for the museum to plant. The sculptures, which will remain in place for two years and were financed mostly by private and corporate donors, connect themselves to the history of postwar American land art but also push it raucously, impishly into the 21st century, recalling a phrase that Mr. Fox likes to quote from the art critic Jeff Kelley to describe Las Vegas: “The American dream in drag.”

All of the documents and ephemera chronicling the creation of the pieces, and they are legion — “I don’t think I have any files as fat with legal documents,” Mr. Fox said — will go into the museum’s archives. And the outsize presence of the sculptures within easy driving distance of Las Vegas, rising from a scatter of mesquite bushes, yucca and stumps of dead Joshua trees, is like a high-art billboard for the institution’s particular ambitions.

“I came out here the other day to watch trains — that’s what I like to do — and I spotted these things and told my wife, ‘You’ve *got* to come out here and see this,’” said Bobby Deren, a retired pilot who had parked alongside the road the other day and hiked with his wife, Wendy Hunter, to inspect the pieces close up well before they were supposed to be open to the public. The two were vacationing in Las Vegas from Vancouver to celebrate her birthday, and Mr. Deren said that they were far from the first to feel the need for proximity to the oddly beckoning towers. “There was a gal out here before posing in front of them naked except for a scarf.”

Mr. Rondinone, who had seen the sculptures as the boulders were being shaped, connected and painted at a nearby quarry but never in their intended setting, looking like sentinels stationed before the sweep of the McCullough mountain range, walked around them quietly, almost reverently, as the sun went down. He said he welcomed whatever the desert would do to the pieces over the next two years. The erosion, fading and dirt would become part of the works. (Human intervention, in the form of spray paint or target-practice bullets, is not invited; the pieces have been coated with an antigraffiti shield and will be repaired if damaged.)



David B. Walker, the executive director of the Nevada Museum of Art.
Chris Holloman, via Nevada Museum of Art

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His original intention, he said, had been something a bit more humble in the landscape, cone-shaped piles of stones instead of the irregular, almost teetering columns he eventually conceived, inspired by natural hoodoo rock formations in Utah.

“But then I realized that size doesn’t mean anything out here,” said Mr. Rondinone, 51, who was raised in the Swiss resort town of Brunnen and lives and works in Harlem. “The scale makes everything look small. That’s what you quickly figure out in the desert.”

The poet and artist John Giorno, Mr. Rondinone’s longtime boyfriend, who had accompanied him to see the pieces, observed that despite the desert’s leveling effect on all within it, “these really hold their own here — they’re like Pop land art.”

“It’s kind of like they even have their own personalities,” he added. “Not exactly human, I guess. But maybe kindly disposed toward us.”

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