



Clockwise from main: *Seven Magic Mountains* in Nevada; Antony Gormley's *Inside Australia* on Lake Ballard; *Prada Marfa*, by Elmgreen & Dragset; and artist Ugo Rondinone. GETTY IMAGES, NYT



ART SETTING

Scene stealers

A Day-Glo installation in Nevada is in the tradition of works created for a landscape, writes **Stephen Todd**.

Rising from the parched plains of the Nevada desert, a half-hour's drive south of Las Vegas, are *Seven Magic Mountains*. They are part of neither the Sierra, nor the Madre, nor the Red Rock ranges. Chunky Day-Glo totems composed of local limestone boulders stacked up to 10 metres high, the *Magic Mountains* are the latest work of New York-based Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone.

Five years in the making, the work pays homage to Land Art, the largely American movement that shook up the 1970s commercial art market by creating massive, unattainable installations embedded in the landscape. Often monolithic, usually immutable, always integral to their environment, works such as Rondinone's *Seven Magic Mountains* are places of pilgrimage for the cultural faithful.

Utah's Great Salt Lake has Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* of 1970, a massive iodine coil of more than 6000 tonnes of black basalt rocks and earth dredged from the site. New Mexico has Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977), 400 metal poles placed precisely 220 feet (67 metres) apart, which not only track the undulating topography, but attract dramatic bolts of forked lightning. It's an experience many visitors (including this one) report as magical, almost mystical.

Near the goldfields of Menzies in north Western Australia is Antony Gormley's poetical installation *Inside Australia* (2002-2003). It comprises 51 human figures in patinated metal placed 750 metres apart across arid Lake Ballard.

"I wanted to try to find the human equivalent for this geological place," says the British artist. "I think human memory is part of place, and place a dimension of memory."

What makes these experiences so special, Sydney-based international art consultant

Mark Hughes tells me (by Skype, from a Los Angeles freeway), "is that our connection to the work and, more importantly, to the artist, feels stronger away from the museum walls."

"Away from sponsors' banners and wall labels, you feel a different, much more intimate connection to the work. There is a very bold vulnerability evident when these works are built at that scale, for the world to see, often for a very long time."

Rondinone's *Seven Magic Mountains* is a collaboration between New York's Public Art Fund, which specialises in bringing provocative contemporary art to a broad public (for free), and the Nevada Museum of Art. The required funds – \$US3.5 million (\$4.6 million) – were crowd-sourced via Kickstarter: every donor got a Snapchat Shoutout from the Nevada Museum roof.

The *Mountains*, which were unveiled in May, will be in situ for two years. The museum says the site promises to become a "destination/pilgrimage for art enthusiasts, attracting visitors from around the country and the world". More than 16 million vehicles are expected to pass by during its two-year existence – the *Seven Magic Mountains* have been strategically installed alongside the Interstate 15, which links Las Vegas to California.

That's a lot of selfies.

When the Scandinavian duo Elmgreen & Dragset unveiled *Prada Marfa* – an empty replica of a Prada store made from adobe, plaster and MDF – alongside the desolate Highway 90 leading into the small Texan town of Marfa in 2005, it felt as if the entire art/fashion cognoscenti left Manhattan to make the nearly 3000-kilometre road trip to be there – well-heeled pedals to the metal.

It's a terrific piece, at once ironically iconic yet formally beautiful. By extracting



Above: Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* in New Mexico.

a typical Prada store from glamorous shopping precincts such as the Via Montenapoleone in Milan or Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles, the artists deftly reposition it as a cultural signifier: as ridiculous as it is succinctly magnificent.

Miuccia Prada gave her consent for her company's logo to be used. She is, after all, the head of the Fondazione Prada, possibly the biggest cultural drawcard to Milan since Da Vinci painted his *Last Supper* on the walls of the Santa Maria delle Grazie. Cultural tourism is not new.

Marfa, a desert town of 2000 people, had been on the art tourism map since minimalist sculptor Donald Judd moved there in 1971 and began investing in permanent art installations, using his considerable earnings and \$US4 million from the edgy Dia Art Foundation.

And yes, the culture vultures did flock to see his luxuriously reductive sculptures set in this desert environ. Judd's Chinati Foundation attracted 11,000 visitors in 2012. Many, many more come to Marfa for film festivals, concerts and other exhibitions. Which is great, but it's pricing the locals out of their own market.

Which will not be the case with the *Seven Magic Mountains*. Nearby Las Vegas generates more than sufficient wealth with

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Mark Hughes, art consultant

its casinos and convention centres – and "locals" are thin on the ground anyway. But in some ways, the *Mountains* riff off the gaudy glitz of the Strip, the lights of which can be seen pulsating in the distance. America's Sin City, splayed out, glittering in the desert with its craps and blackjacks, its Cartier and mink.

Some have called the *Seven Magic Mountains* "lurid", and it's true the installation is dazzling. As Rondinone points out, "It's activated by the sun, because Day-Glo gets wilder in the sun." At night, they glow almost eerily in the desert moonlight.

It is easy to imagine Sharon Stone as Ginger in *Casino*, roaring past in her 1975 Mercedes 450 SL convertible, fur-class. If only Martin Scorsese's incisive camera could have made the *Magic Mountains* immortal. **L&L**