

the PARIS REVIEW

Land Forms

Claire Vaye Watkins & Charlotte Strick

ISSUE 226, FALL 2018



NICHOLAS CROFT & MICHAELA MACLEOD— POLYMÉTIS, PINK PUNCH, 2013–14, NATURAL RUBBER LATEX ROPE. INSTALLATION VIEW, JARDINS DE MÉTIS, REFORD GARDENS, GRAND-MÉTIS, QUEBEC CITY, CANADA.

Seven Magic Mountains (2016), a landscape-scale sculpture by Ugo Rondinone, sits on the undeveloped end of Las Vegas Boulevard, miles south of any recognizable segment of the Strip. My family and I passed a shooting range, signs cautioning the presence of a buried petroleum pipeline. We passed a racetrack and, in a chain-linked lot, two forgotten freight trucks, their doors flung open. Murals had been painted on each. One read *ruen*, the other *swoe*—the mystic poetry of trespass. Soon, curious colors rose from the horizon. Boulders painted in vibrant neons and in black, blue, and silver were stacked in seven pillars, thirty, thirty-five feet high.

Rondinone's colors do not seem natural, but there is nothing on this earth that the earth did not give us, nothing technically unnatural under the sun. As the industry propaganda in Nevada goes, If it isn't grown, it has to be mined. It's such an appealing slogan, as if cell phones sprout from sunflowers, though it ignores the lasting brutality of extraction and our specific human alchemy, how we spin progress into poison. The colors evoke the spectacle of the city at the other end of the boulevard. Especially the neon, the word for these Day-Glo colors and the noble gas filling all those tubes.

Neon, itself harvested from air, makes Las Vegas a nighttime city, but there are no lights at *Seven Magic Mountains*. The piece needs sunlight, which has already begun to fade the pinks and yellows. The tops of the towers are going pale where they take the brunt of the sun.

The sun, pounding the neon paint so it throbbed like nuclear waste, was the most important element of *Seven Magic Mountains* the day I visited. It was over a hundred degrees. The heat urged us strangers to gather in the shade, so that we became a metaphor for so many cities in the West: too many people huddled at the base of a mountain, worshipping and trying not to burn.

Is there, today, such a thing as nature? Land art came into vogue at a time when it seemed everything would be okay if only we recycled. The works that stick to my ribs these days evoke a visceral sense of deep time. Even if grand by art-world standards, these pieces humble against nature's scale. Jean Dry Lake, the desert home of *Seven Magic Mountains*, is limned by nine or ten mountain ranges. Not mountains—*ranges*. As massive as Rondinone's sculptures are, they are dwarfed in that landscape. To call them mountains is pure whimsy.

I found a geologic revelation in this whimsy. Pressing myself against the base of one sculpture and looking straight up, I saw the different colors of the boulders become time, different epochs recorded on the walls of a canyon. It was a cartoon version of the time travel I felt recently in the Rio Grande's Santa Elena Canyon. Land art invites us to consider the made and unmade artworks around us while simultaneously making categories like *nature* and *culture* elastic. Might the earth itself be categorized as one big land-art sculpture, since human beings are now the force inflicting the most change on its surface, more impactful than wind and water and ice?

Rondinone's sculptures seem childlike and innocent against a concept like the Anthropocene. People visiting *Seven Magic Mountains* on the day I did busied themselves with documentation, selfie and otherwise, doing handstands and advanced yoga poses. Many visitors were defiant of signage prohibiting climbing, and the seams between the painted boulders have been plugged with small, unpainted rocks, ordinary gravel put there by ordinary people. There is graffiti, too. Everybody saying, I was here.

Human figures appear only once in this portfolio, yet we are everywhere: the ornate and intentional lines, the shaky play of balanced stones, the arresting juxtaposition of textures—boots on snow, red ribbons of berries across a stand of juniper, a mirror reflecting its own materials, sand and light.

Throughout it all, colors call us. Perhaps they are our way of insisting on our separateness. We like to think we invented these colors, conjured them, when in fact we merely found them in the ground. Lapis is the original blue. My father mined it.

The earth gave us blue, and we made blue pop and fizz in a dry-wash cranny. Is a ghost of blue smoke any more magic than the dry wash from which it plumes? Anyone can see that of the two, the wash is the more impressive sculpture. It took millions of years to make, after all, a collaboration between tectonics and climate, earth and sky. A sculpture nests the ephemeral inside the ancient, and we identify with the smoke. Why? Because we made it? Because it moves?

Because it dies, I think. We are smoke, mineral, then gas—temporary against eternal hills.

We could hear gunshots at *Seven Magic Mountains*, distant pops coming from public land turned shooting range. Minerals inside minerals, exploding. That human alchemy again.

My daughter recently asked me, “What is paint?”

“It’s rocks,” I told her. “Rocks and plants.”

I didn’t tell her that some paint is poison, and that the poison is how you can tell we made it. That’s our mark.

See us there, in the fossil record? We are not crushed lapis on cave wall or ink on papyrus. What we leave behind, our species’ most lasting installation, will be a glowing band of radioactive plastic.

Land art offers us lessons in decay. It says there is no real physical division between us and it—we are of it, from it. We are permeable bodies of water and mineral for some time, and then we become gas, ash.

—*Claire Vaye Watkins*



UGO RONDINONE, SEVEN MAGIC MOUNTAINS, 2016. INSTALLATION VIEW, LAS VEGAS, NEVADA. COPRODUCED BY ART PRODUCTION FUND AND THE NEVADA MUSEUM OF ART.



ALEJANDRO DURÁN, GOTA (DROP), 2011, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINTS, EACH 52" X 40". SIAN KA'AN BIOSPHERE RESERVE, QUINTANA ROO, MEXICO.



ALEJANDRO DURÁN, VIENTO DE JADE (JADE WIND), 2011, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINTS, EACH 52" X 40". SIAN KA'AN BIOSPHERE RESERVE, QUINTANA ROO, MEXICO.