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Art That Puts You in a Man-Made Crater

Michael Heizer's 'Actual Size: Munich Rotary,' a storied work of land art



Michael Heizer, 'Actual Size: Munich Rotary,' 1970, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York *PHOTO: LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM ART*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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For Michael Heizer, an artist who has sculpted with boulders and dynamited vast tracts of desert land, projecting pictures on a wall might seem like a minor operation.

The stakes are high, however, for a monumental slideshow now on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Taking over the whole of the museum's sprawling fifth floor, "Actual Size: Munich Rotary" comprises six custom projectors and vintage photo slides that represent the sole remains of a storied work of "land art" created by Mr. Heizer in 1969.

Back then, his tools included a backhoe to dig a gaping hole in the ground that measured 16 feet deep and 100 feet in diameter, with 1,000 tons of earth removed from an otherwise flat expanse of land in Munich, Germany. Now, the machinery has been distilled down to special projectors designed to give viewers the sensation of standing in the middle of the excavation, known in the decades since by the title “Munich Depression.”

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“When you’re in the center of it, looking up, the sky and the horizon line come together and disappear,” said Donna De Salvo, senior curator at the Whitney, which is presenting the installation in New York for the first time.

Mr. Heizer, 71 years old, splits time between the remote Nevada desert and New York. The son of a renowned archaeologist of the American west, the artist has spent the bulk of his nearly five-decade career thinking about sculpture in monumental and metaphysical ways.

“I was interested in massive objects as well as the absence of objects,” Mr. Heizer, who has long preferred to let his art speak for itself, told a curator in an interview in 1984.



Artist Michael Heizer *PHOTO: RICHARD VOGEL/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Many of his works are so large that full views are available only from above, by helicopter or plane. One of the best known, “Double Negative” from 1969, involved gouging and carving 240,000 tons of rock out of facing cliffs in Nevada. His unfinished magnum opus, “City,” stretches more than a mile long and features hulking abstract structures of rock, concrete and steel.

Though “Munich Rotary” has been in the Whitney’s collection since 1996, the museum lacked sufficient open space to accommodate projections of proper engulfing scale. In its new building, the large, column-free fifth floor allows for immersive images that rise 17 feet high and stretch 76 yards in width.

Enormity was part of the project from the beginning.

“It kept people in magnificent silence—it was overwhelming,” said Heiner Friedrich, who commissioned the original “Munich Depression” for his gallery in Germany and later served as one of three co-founders of the Dia Art Foundation in New York.

When the hole was dug, gallery-goers were greeted with an empty exhibition space and an invitation to go outside instead to look at the dirt and sky from within the depression.

Mr. Friedrich said he and Mr. Heizer explored the idea of creating a similar work at the time in lower Manhattan, in the dugout foundation holes for the World Trade Center then under construction—“but the buildings were too close to allow for the horizon.”

To document the temporary artwork and present it in another fashion, Mr. Heizer took photographs and went to work creating custom projectors to beam images of desired size. Maris Ambats, a self-styled engineer in New York, helped design a set of machines that proved up to the task.



‘Munich Depression’ (1969), a 1,000-ton earth displacement, 100 feet in diameter and 17 feet deep. *PHOTO: MICHAEL HEIZER/GAGOSIAN GALLERY*

“It was Michael’s quest to get high-resolution images 40-some-odd years ago,” said Mr. Ambats, whose work includes patents for such things as a flexible ion emitter and a credit as co-inventor of the mood ring, that color-changing 1970s fad.

The main challenge for each projector was containing heat from a bright 2,000-watt bulb, which could easily melt slides as well as parts of the projector itself.

The solution came by way of multiple lenses inside the machine to bend and separate light, plus a fan in back to work as a cooling agent. A special Metrogon lens used for aerial photography served as the final conduit between the projector and the image on a wall.

The original projectors, encased in aluminum boxes and beaming atop 9-foot poles, remain part of “Actual Size: Munich Rotary,” which was meant to be more than just documentation.

“When you look, you very much have a sense of the age and there’s a wonder to that,” said Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, who as director of the Whitney’s conservation department worked with Mr. Heizer to restore the projectors after decades of disuse. “You get the human quality, which we worked very hard to retain.”

The texture and grain of the black-and-white images, as well as the enveloping scale, summon for viewers a sense of land art often encountered only in paltry images in books, said Ms. De Salvo.

“He plays here with an experience that is original in itself,” the curator said of the installation, which remains on view through April 10. “It has an authenticity, a reality and a physicality in its own right.”