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Land Art Gets Its Close-Up in New Film

Art form is chronicled in documentary 'Troublemakers: The Story of Land Art'



Charles Ross in New Mexico, 1976, pursuing his decades-long construction of his work 'Star Axis.' PHOTO: ELIZABETH GINSBERG

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

Sept. 27, 2015 9:30 p.m. ET

Some of the most momentous recent art on Earth was made with earth itself: golden crust from a desert mesa, imposing loads of dark brown dirt, piles of spiraling rocks arranged in a lake. All of those and other terrestrial offerings rank as materials on survey in the new documentary “Troublemakers: The Story of Land Art.”

The film, premiering Tuesday in Los Angeles, then showing twice at the New York Film Festival, on Thursday and Sunday, tells the story of land art as it began in the 1960s and evolved through large-scale projects still open to visitation today.

Classics of the form, also known as earth art or earthworks, include “Double Negative,” a

1,500-foot trench cut into the Nevada desert by Michael Heizer; “The Lightning Field,” an array of 400 lightning rods in remote New Mexico by Walter De Maria; and “Spiral Jetty,” a corkscrewing sculpture of 6,000 tons of rocks installed by Robert Smithson in Utah’s Great Salt Lake.

“These were radical people using the skin of the earth as a canvas,” said Germano Celant, a curator and art historian who appears in film. “They have different ideas of time and different ideas of scale. They create disorder in the system.”

James Crump, director of “Troublemakers,” took an interest in the subject after finding a disconnect between land art’s monumental status and how little about its meanings and motivations is really known.

“I think we should rediscover these sites and spend more time discussing them and opening up the discourse around what was land art and the philosophy behind it,” Mr. Crump said. “There are misunderstandings.”

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intent of artists not known for their loquacious ways. Mr. Heizer, who lives in Nevada and remains at work on his massive decades-in-the-making sculptural complex “City,” speaks only very occasionally about his work, and Mr. De Maria, who died in 2013, gave in essence one interview during his mysterious career. Mr. Smithson was more antic with words, but he died young, at the age of 35, in a plane crash while surveying sites for a land-art project in Texas.

Signs of the times in the ’60s and ’70s provide enticing clues, though.

“You can’t really separate the zeitgeist from what inspired these people,” said Mr. Crump, who set land art in a context informed by ruptures from the Vietnam War and raptures surrounding space travel, as well as pop-cultural touchstones like “2001: A Space Odyssey” and Michelangelo Antonioni’s desert movie “Zabriskie Point.”

Another certain factor was an escape from New York, where most of the major land artists began before their forays to the American West. Land art flourished as a rebuke

to the commercial market and the encroaching professionalism of art.

“These were artists who really conceived of their role and presence in society as troublemakers,” said Philippe Vergne, director of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, which presents a screening of “Troublemakers” this week before the film moves to New York. “That was part of the DNA of being an artist: You needed to ask tough questions and make tough work. When you look at the evolution of art since then, it has changed so much.”



‘Spiral Jetty,’ a sculpture of 6,000 tons of rocks installed by Robert Smithson in Utah’s Great Salt Lake. *PHOTO: GIANFRANCO GORGONI/GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES*

“Today everybody is talking about decoration and market value,” said Mr. Celant. “There is no myth, no utopia, no desire for getting out of the structure of the market. These kinds of people are heroes. They are super-artists.”

Mr. Celant, artistic director of the Prada Foundation in Milan, Italy, will also host a screening of “Troublemakers” there alongside a tribute to gallerist Virginia Dwan, who features prominently in the film as a pioneering supporter and patron of land art in its early years. “There’s history to be done,” Mr. Celant said of a need to recognize Ms. Dwan’s contributions.

Other figures in the film include Nancy Holt, whose large “Sun Tunnels” sculpture still receives visitors in Utah after being installed in the ’70s, and Charles Ross, whose “Star Axis” is nearing completion after decades of work in New Mexico. Commentary comes from fellow artists at work at the time, including Carl Andre and Lawrence Weiner.

The leading role, however, goes to the art itself, surveyed in swooping aerial shots from

the recent cinematic sojourns as well as archival materials from the era of its making. The optimal experience entails travel, according to Mr. Celant: “You have to go there, alone,” he said.

Short of that, “Troublemakers” presents land art as a phenomenon fit for appreciation on the silver screen.

Mr. Crump said he turned to film “to create something immersive and experiential, because it’s important to raise awareness of the subject. A generation of young artists needs to know.”

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