

## Crowd-funded artwork casts Day-Glo magic in the Nevada desert

By Stephen Todd | August 11, 2016

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 the New York-based Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone.



Seven Magic Mountains by Ugo Rondinone glows in the light of the desert moon.

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."

### Intimate connection

"What makes these experiences so special is that our connection to the work and, more importantly, to the artist, feels stronger away from the museum walls," Sydney-based international art consultant Mark Hughes tells me (by Skype, from a Los Angeles freeway).

"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 Art Production 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 roof of the Nevada Museum.

The Mountains, which were unveiled in May, will be in situ for two years. According to the museum, 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.

### Cultural tourism

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 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 half a millennium ago. 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 Chianti 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 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 quite 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 Nevada 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.