

**Art in the Nevada Desert**

By David Morgan | October 2016



Gianfranco Gorgoni/Courtesy of Art Production Fund and Nevada Museum of Art

Along I-15 in Nevada, just outside Las Vegas, seven technicolor rock towers appear as if a mirage in the desert. It's the vision of Ugo Rondinone, a Swiss artist living in Harlem, who calls his Day-Glo painted limestone creations the Seven Magic Mountains.



Gianfranco Gorgoni/Courtesy of Art Production Fund and Nevada Museum of Art

Cowan asked, "There are some people who say that it's marred the desert. What do you say to those people?"

Rondinone replied, "Many people who have never experienced the landscape, the Nevada desert, for the first time when they come with their children, they see the beauty of this landscape."

It's not for ever, however. In two years Seven Magic Mountains is scheduled to be dismantled – and will then remain only in the mind's eye.



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Droves of the curious have been braving the desert heat - not to mention the warnings of venomous snakes - to investigate the oddity for themselves.

Made of painted limestone, these rock piles appear both ancient and modern, native and foreign. And that is precisely why it's art, says David Walker of the Nevada Museum of Art.

"I think we're seeing a movement over the last few years, where artists would like to engage a larger public and would like to have scale," Walker told CBS News' Lee Cowan.



CBS News

Seven Magic Mountains is the vision of Ugo Rondinone.

"It's not something intellectual; it's just something to experience," he told CBS News' Lee Cowan. "I always say you don't have to understand an artwork. You have to feel it. And you feel something when you have a connection."



Gianfranco Gorgoni/Courtesy of Art Production Fund and Nevada Museum of Art

According to the artist's statement, "Like my five previous public sculpture projects -- the neon rainbows, clay masks, olive trees, scholar rocks and stone figures -- the Seven Magic Mountains is embedded in the observation of nature and its relation to the human condition."



The Seven Magic Mountains consist of seven stone sculptures of brightly-painted Jericho boulders, stacked one on top of another. Each "mountain" is between 28 and 35 feet high.

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Rondinone took the boulders from the landscape itself. Each he hand-picked from a nearby quarry, some weighing more than 50,000 pounds a piece.

The stones were shaved flush with the help of a huge diamond saw, and holes were drilled for an internal skeleton to hold the boulders in place.



And then came layer after layer of bright Day-Glo paint.

“I wanted to use natural material, but make it artificial,” Rondinone said.

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The Nevada Museum of Art wanted to reprise the tradition of large installations, like Robert Smithson's "The Spiral Jetty," jutting out into Utah's Great Salt Lake. Seven Magic Mountains is positioned to get the maximum number of eyeballs from people going to and from Las Vegas.

"Normally I work in galleries and museums, and that's just a very small percentage of people go to a museum or a gallery. So I love the idea of public art and having it in the open for everyone to see it," Rondinone said.



CBS News

Its size is historic; it's the largest land art project in the area in more than 40 years.



Gianfranco Gorgoni/Courtesy of Art Production Fund and Nevada Museum of Art

According to Rondinone, the project is situated at the same spot where the “last spike” of the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad was driven on January 1905.



Gianfranco Gorgoni/Courtesy of Art Production Fund and Nevada Museum of Art

People have been making connections with Seven Magic Mountains ever since the piece was unveiled this past May.

“It’s so colorful, it’s huge, and honestly it’s not something you’d expect out here in the desert so it’s really surprising,” said Nicole Villanueva of Los Angeles.