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Q+A: DAVID WALKER:

Open land is a blank canvas for big ideas in art

By **Kristen Peterson** (contact)

Monday, May 16, 2016 | 2 a.m.

From the Herculean effort to install Ugo Rondinone's sculptural homage to the Western landscape and its neon town came a surprising byproduct: an art-based love fest growing between Northern and Southern Nevada.

The Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, co-producer of Rondinone's "Seven Magic Mountains," has been championing the idea, with representatives looking to be more involved in the entire state — particularly Southern Nevada and its effort to create a Las Vegas art museum in Symphony Park. Additionally, JoAnne Northrup, NMA's director of Contemporary Art Initiatives, has teamed with Las Vegas-based art adviser Michele Quinn to curate "Tilting the Basin: Contemporary Art of Nevada." Opening in August at the Reno museum, the show will feature works by artists on both ends of the state.

Nevada Museum of Art

Founded in 1931 as the Nevada Art Gallery, the Nevada Museum of Art occupies a 60,000-square-foot building in downtown Reno full of significant works by national and international artists. And in January 2009, the museum launched the Center for Art + Environment, a research hub and archive dedicated to "creative interactions between people and their natural, built, and virtual environments." Directed by celebrated writer and cultural geographer Bill Fox, it's home to a triennial conference and materials about works by land artists from

Regarding large-scale projects in Southern Nevada such as “Seven Magic Mountains,” guidance from an accredited, long-standing art institution could be a propellant, a boon for a town without significant art education, something punctuated by the challenge of fundraising for Rondinone’s installation. NMA head David Walker says that only a small percentage of the community was aware of land art, despite the global renown of artist Michael Heizer, who has been creating monumental works in Nevada since the 1960s.

“My hope is that ‘Seven Magic Mountains’ is going to be a nice bridge between some of the hugely historically significant projects of Heizer and other land artists with the future of contemporary art,” Walker says, “and that during the two years of ‘Seven Magic Mountains’ there’s going to be an incredible, authentic conversation in Southern Nevada about the need for an art museum.”

In the midst of plans for expansion in Reno, Walker shared his thoughts about the effort here, and the role being played by this new work woven into the land.

What is the Nevada Museum of Art’s relationship with Las Vegas right now? We are very interested in working with the current group down in Las Vegas. These things take time, but we think we could bring a lot of experience and expertise and a good reputation to a significant project in Symphony Park, and that’s exactly where an art museum should be, in my opinion, in Las Vegas.

What is NMA’s role in advancing land art here? Our next logical step as a museum is to actually get outside and invest in the commissioning of large-scale works. ... We’re looking at the landscape in Nevada and in the West, but we’re also looking up — literally — looking at new possibilities for artists who really want to do monumental works, and we’re very interested in works that are changing the game in terms of how museums behave and what museums get behind.

Why is Nevada ripe for this? We do think pretty big in this state, because we are allowed to. And because we’re not confined to the constraints of a metropolitan museum or a metropolitan area, I think it allows for us to think a little bit differently about who we are, where we’re going and the things we can do. We cracked the code with this project. It’s a very exciting time right now.

So “Seven Magic Mountains” opens new doors. Artists are interested in engaging a larger public and creating works outside of the walls of the institutional galleries, and we’re going to see more and more of that. I think this provides a really lovely way to utilize our public lands and engage Americans in appreciating these wonderful sublime landscapes that we have, especially in Nevada.

What community impacts will it have? With (Clark County) educators, we will be developing lesson plans and curriculum, and providing an interactive exchange for educators who teach art and other disciplines to look at “Seven Magic Mountains,” to be able to go out there with students and to implement a curriculum related to maybe the formality of the piece, form and color and scale, or even connect it to the petroglyphs nearby or other activities in the region that are historically significant. Outreach. Public programming. That’s what museums do.

around the world.

