A common reaction upon seeing Ugo Rondinone's colossal, neon vision in the desert outside of Las Vegas, Seven Magic Mountains, is to gasp and then pick your jaw up off the ground. This stunning surprise was an exclamation point in public art this year, complete with enchanting title and colors. Rondinone's work honors nature, and he successfully inspires feeling before thinking. The towering Seven Magic Mountains are framed by their magnificent Mojave stage, maintaining a bright and powerful stance in a location of historical significance. They echo natural hoodoo rock formations, pointing to Rondinone's deep reverence for the environment, but as he explains so memorably, "My art is not about something; it wants to be that something."

Kristin Foss: How did you get the idea for Seven Magic Mountains?
Ugo Rondinone: In 2013, I was working on a big project for Rockefeller Center where I stacked five stone figures in the middle of the city at the Rockefeller Plaza, and those stone figures were built with bluestone blocks. While I was working on that, I was approached by the Nevada Museum. They wanted to explore an idea that could happen on the strip between Las Vegas and L.A., and because I was already working with the stone material, it was a given that I would also use it in Las Vegas, but in a contrary sense. In New York, I used the stone in its natural, rough way, but in the desert, in nature, I wanted to give it an artificial appearance. If you see them from afar or even close, you think they're styrofoam and not really heavy rocks. This was the initial idea, and it was also a way to bring forward the notion of Land Art in a contemporary way. My work stands out in nature, so maybe that's a way of bringing Land Art into the twenty-first century.

The color is what makes it contemporary.
The neon colors and their cruel artificiality. The Land Art movement at the end of the 1960s camouflaged the intervention, and I wanted to highlight it, with the same premise to make a work surrounding the beauty of the desert and landscape, but with a different tool, bringing colors to distinguish the work from the landscape background and the setting.

Is it hard to find Day-Glo paint that doesn't fade?
The Day-Glo is not the problem. It's the coating, which is aircraft coating. The challenge was to find a lacquer that doesn't have high gloss because the sun would bounce off of
it, which would be very irritating. If you use something matte, you're drawn in, but if it's glossy, your view bounces off it.

What makes you decide to use color or lack of it? Is it mostly based on location?

In this sense, it was really the dynamic between this one and the work that I did at Rockefeller Center. In the middle of the most abrupt site on Earth, I wanted to bring nature in its full force, not manipulated. And in the desert, I wanted to do the contrary. That's how my work plays out—it is activated by duality and doesn't have fixed values. If I would have said a stone can never be painted, then I would close any perspective on my work. If I keep it open, then even if I had previously used the stone in a raw way, I can use it in a completely different way, and then there is a duality. I don't give either the better value; they are equally valued.

For the colors in Nevada, besides the Day-Glo, I chose the seven rainbow colors and added black, white and silver, but the foundation is the rainbow colors. If you see closely, they are not mixed. You don't have two different oranges. It's always the same shade of pink, red and blue on all the stones. Even if I use a second yellow stone, it's always the same shade of yellow. If you concentrate on the colors when you stand in front of all seven, you can feel the colors bouncing around.

I see how the yellow rocks change levels so the color goes up and down.

Exactly. Also, from far away, everything looks small, so you have to approach it to get a sense of the size. In the desert, everything vanishes in size, so I decided early on that I would organize those Seven Magic Mountains very close together to create an artificial canyon that you walk around.

I spent a lot of time finding the right spot. I would go back and forth on the highway, and at some point, from far away, I saw something silverish. It was a dry lake, and the Seven Magic Mountains are aligned with that in the background. In front of them—it goes unnoticed—but there is a little plaque that indicates "the last spike," meaning it was the last spike hammered into the ground for the railroad in 1908. One side came from Salt Lake City, and the other from Los Angeles. Without that railroad, Las Vegas wouldn't exist, so it is significant that Seven Magic Mountains is aligned with that symbolic information.
You just stumbled upon that?
It was really by chance, yes. It's a nice coincidence.

Why did you call them Seven Magic Mountains?
Because there are seven. And the color, of course, has a fairy tale appearance, so that's why. It's like a modern day Stonehenge. Not that people should worship there, but maybe have a spiritual moment. If you go at sunset or sunrise, you feel the magic of this glow because the main force in the desert is the sun, and the Day-Glo color is activated by the sun. When you have a full moon, you still have the glow of these colors at night. That's the magic!

It is magic. I made a painting called Magic Mountain and someone asked me if it referenced the Sylvia Plath poem, which I hadn't read.
I had never heard of it either, but I looked it up when you first mentioned it. There is also the book Magic Mountain by Thomas Mann, but my title isn't related to that either. I just wanted to give it a name that people could relate to.

Did you make seven formations because of the colors of the rainbow?
Exactly. Yes.

I love your piece, Hei! Yes, made with rainbow letters on the side of a museum.
The rainbow poems were from 1996 and were my first public works, so I wanted to speak in a universal language, and the rainbow is a symbol everybody can relate to. At the same time, the public sculptures that came after that had nature at the core, so I did clay masks out of bronze, but I made them in clay first so you would see the imprints of my hand. Then they were cast in bronze and then painted again in a clay color so, when viewed outdoors, it looks as if they are made of fresh clay. Those masks were called Moonrise and there were twelve, one for each month. For my third group of works for a public art project, I cast ancient olive trees in aluminum and painted them white, so again, you have a relation to nature.

The fourth series was a collection of scholar's rocks, which I collect. It's a Chinese tradition that goes back to the Ming Dynasty where monks would collect rocks and and bring them to their studio and meditate with them. They saw those rocks as concentrations of nature. I've collected them for 20 years, and in 2007, I made a selection of 14 of those stones and enlarged them to 15-foot sculptures made of sand, gravel and concrete. Then came the Rockefeller project, Human Nature, and then Seven Magic Mountains. All of my public works started from the rainbow poems and are related to nature.

I love your sculptures in San Francisco. Their expressions are unexpected for permanent public art.
Those are three of the Moonrise pieces. The faces were inspired by Yupik masks. Turn-of-the-century indigenous people in Alaska made masks specific to the phases of the moon. The eyes and mouth would imitate the phases. I also cast them in aluminum and called them Sunrise, so again, we have a duality of moonrise and sunrise.

What makes a scholar's rock different from other stones?
They are made of soft limestone and they have a lot of holes. Over the centuries, the water and weather worked on them and formed their appearance. Many scholar's rocks are
called Taluq stones, made where the limestone is soft and the salt is aggressive. Over centuries, it digs holes in these stones. That's why you see them old and patinated. The ancient olive trees also have strange forms because they grow on a hill and are exposed to wind force.

Do you spend a lot of time in nature? I grew up in nature. I lived in a small village called Brunnen in Switzerland. It was surrounded by a mountain and lake, and I'm sure that had a big impact on my being. I like nature in general, and it's a big part of my work. All my symbols come directly from the German Romantic movement, which was the first time the spirituality of the landscape was acknowledged. That's when people started climbing mountains and looking out into infinity, so nature became synonymous with the Romantic era. It was the first time people started to acknowledge the importance of dreams and irrational feelings as the symbols I use in my work are related to German Romanticism, which has a foundation in nature. Nature is personified and becomes a soul.

Earlier, my work was landscape drawings, then mandala-like sun paintings where the colors blurred into each other to give a hypnotic effect, like staring into the sun. I did star and cloud paintings, used stones and clowns... the clown becomes a solitary figure on the edge of the cliff looking out. All of these symbols have origins in the German Romantic movement. Americans are not so familiar with German Romanticism, but people like Rothko were very much influenced by it. There is one painting by Caspar David Friedrich called The Monk... By the Sea! I'm an American and I'm a Monk By the Sea, is the only German Romantic painting I can name. And if you see that painting, you're going to make the relation to Rothko very quickly.

Right! It's all becoming very clear. I also see the connection with your work, but you take it into another dimension. Do the Magic Mountains have different personalities and names in your mind?

In the end, I am always surprised how they look because it isn't something you can plan. First, I chose the 37 boulders. I photographed them and then decided by feeling which should be on top of the other. I made a distinction that there would be a minimum of three and a maximum of six boulders for each mountain. Of course, all of them are towering, and in the natural formations, we are inclined to see faces and personality. The weather and time of day makes them change dramatically. As a group they're called Seven Magic Mountains, but as single mountains, they are named after the colors they carry—Red, Blue, White, Silver, Black, Mountain, and so on.

Seeing them in person is a mystical experience. I'm very surprised that people stop by because it's not given that people will stop in the middle of the desert.

Did you ever do rock piling as a meditative practice? Every child seems to do that. We have all experienced this process that everybody is drawn to. There are very serious practitioners of balancing rocks as a spiritual activity.

Art, spirituality and nature seem very intertwined for you. For me, visual art is a spiritual and transcendent discipline in the sense that art has to be in its own time to have the feeling of today, but at the same time, it has to be as old as art is. If you do art today with relevance, then movements like Pop Art and Land Art from the '60s are naturally part of information in this new work. Every artwork has its history and carries the whole information of art history. The importance is only as much as you can bring something new to that information database.

Like the scholar's rocks, with their years of weathered history, they are connected. It's inevitable.

You have some smaller versions of the Magic Mountains at Sadie Coles. Were they maquettes? I trained myself for probably half a year, just doing small ones, to give myself a feeling of how much I was sharing my work, so this was necessary. The big ones took just six months to complete, but the whole process was over four years because it was very difficult to get permission. Everything is very regulated in the desert and, of course, all the historic works from Land Art would not be possible if they were made today. There is a reason to make it difficult, and I understand that. For example, we had to dig out every plant on the site before we came in with the stones, and we had to replant them in the exact same spots.

I think they should have a new public project in the desert every two or three years, because that's the asset that Las Vegas has—its desert. Many people who live around there or visit to gamble and have fun have no idea of the beauty of Las Vegas, and artwork gives easier access to the surrounding landscape and beauty of this desert.

What are some different ways you investigate silence? I know it's something you're interested in. There is a lot of silence in desert rocks.

Silence is the way that I organize. It is a spiritual point in my artwork. It's not a comment about the world. My work is contemplating the world. So if you stand in front of one of my works, it's nothing that should make you think right away. You start looking, and this is the spiritual connection. Art, for me, or successful art, is when it stops me in my tracks, and my thinking stops, and I just start looking. I don't do sarcastic. My work is not ironic. It's not a comment about something, it's building something. My art is not about something, it wants to be that something.

People often ask what art is about, and that's a hard question. They don't ask it as often with music. With music, you just listen and feel the music, and the same should be true for art. You should just feel it. Just exposing yourself to art will create an effect. You don't stand in front of an artwork and start thinking. That's the wrong way to experience art.
Even having the text and title next to the work makes you think too much.
Right, but you just open your senses, and then the language will kick in anyway at some point to organize your feelings.
Language can explain art to a certain degree, but then it fails because it’s visual. You cannot experience the visual as well through language.

That’s why writing about art can seem futile. Do you collect anything besides scholar’s rocks?
I like to collect art. I like to be surrounded by other people’s work. They are more or less exchanges with colleagues. The only artist I collect in a bigger way is Louis Eilshemius. He’s one of the few American Romantic Painters from the turn of the century.

Do you have a favorite work of Land Art?
Probably Mount Rushmore.

Really?
Have you been there? It’s very impressive. It took many hands and 25 years to realize it.

How about Easter Island?
I would love to go there!

I’m still shocked that those massive, ancient stone heads had hidden bodies the whole time.
60% of them is underground.

What are you working on next?
I’m doing a new group of human figures. My first human figures were all sitting and laying, and then the stone figures were standing, and now I’m going to do a group of flying people. I have a very high ceiling in my studio, and I thought I should do something in the air. I started researching how to do flying people. It will be naked bodies flying in space, but gilded in gold. And they will be called We Are the Sun.

Beautiful.
It sounds beautiful, but it has to work! It needs this lightness.

I’m a Leo and the sun is my planet. That’s why I love your work. What’s your sign?
I’m a Sagittarius. November 30th.

Happy Birthday, Ugo Rondinone. See his Seven Magic Mountains
In the Mojave Desert, ten miles south of Las Vegas, through 2016,
thanks to the Nevada Museum of Art.

sevenmagicmountains.com

(3)
Scholar Rockery (“We run through a desert on hunchbacked feet to get over those useless”) 2006, glue, concrete and an inflated rubber structure
The Art Institute of Chicago
2010