

THE STORY BEHIND LAS VEGAS' 'SEVEN MAGIC MOUNTAINS' DESERT ART

2:00 PM PDT 5/11/2016 by Rebecca Kleinman



"Seven Magic Mountains" by Ugo Rondinone

Courtesy of BFA

Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone's colorful land art is bringing happiness to the desert. As one Instagrammer says, "We spend so much money trying to be happy, and who knew a bunch of colorful rocks could make people so happy?"

Angelenos driving along Interstate 15 to Las Vegas may think they're experiencing an actual mirage over the next two years. Fuzzy at first, a Day-Glo-drenched Stonehenge of sorts finally comes into focus about 10 miles south of Sin City. It's OK to pull over and walk around — just watch out for venomous snakes, as signs warn visitors at *Seven Magic Mountains*, an epic land artwork comprising a series of stacked boulder sculptures by Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone.

"I've been traveling the world according to art since 1999, and this is the most satisfying arrival," says independent art curator Natalie Kovacs, who attended the installation's private preview before its official unveiling on May 11. "And it changes all the time. It's even more beautiful today with the clouds."

Costly, time consuming and paperwork-intensive, especially when concerning federal property, as was the case with Rondinone's process, land art is rare now compared to the movement's heyday in the '60s and '70s when the West was still fairly wild. Most people are familiar with the medium through Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" in Utah's Great Salt Lake, and that artists Michael Heizer's and Jean Tinguely's iconic contributions occurred in nearby Jean Dry Lake didn't escape Rondinone when siting his location (the last spike in the railroad connecting a nascent Las Vegas to civilization in 1905 also factored in).

IN THE DESERT: MGM Resorts CEO Jim Murren and artist Ugo Rondinone (Photo: BFA)

"Past land art was camouflaged with its surroundings, but because my project's bright colors pop in the desert, it merges the histories of land art and Pop Art," says Rondinone, who's come to appreciate the arid surroundings since the collaboration between Art Production Fund, a public art nonprofit based in New York, and the Nevada Museum of Art, the state's only accredited art museum and home of the Center for Art + Environment, began five years ago. "Most people don't know how beautiful the land is around Las Vegas, so I hope this inspires them to explore the city's nature."

"People are always asking if *Seven Magic Mountains* is part of Burning Man," says the Nevada Museum of Art's executive director and CEO David B. Walker.

Judging some of the characters among the art world elite — including Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art executive director Tarissa Tiberti and Nevada Museum of Art curatorial director JoAnne Northrup — who came out for the two-day celebration, it could very well have been a mini version of the annual tribal gathering. One guest who couldn't catch a break from Instagram photo requests during the magic hour on Tuesday summarized the mood best.

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