The alien landscape

Jasmine Beul

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The alien landscape

by

Jasmine Beul

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Art

Program of Study Committee:
Ingrid Lilligren, Major Professor
Emily Morgan
Firat Erdim

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2021

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My thesis title, *The Alien Landscape*, was inspired by the way artists have treated the desert landscape of the western United States, particularly of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Deserts are naturally hostile environments, with their lack of water and vegetation. They are often dominated by rock formations and little else. Many of the artists discussed in this paper such as Donald Judd and James Turrell, as well as contemporary figures such as Gisela Colon and the arts organization Desert X all produce formalist art and engage in some form of minimalism. They exist in a non-human place, or an alien landscape.

The artwork I created in response to this research was a series of photographs with my ceramic sculptures as the subjects. Many of them vaguely resemble landscapes, but no landscape that could ever exist. The goal was not to create a trompe l’oeil effect, but instead surreal tableaus, which exist in their own time and space. Color was another element used in the creation of unnatural and alien landscapes.

When researching land artist Michael Heizer, I came across the quote, “size is real, scale is imaginary.”1 In a photograph the only imagery that matters is what fits inside the frame of the camera. It is impossible to determine size, as there is no reliable outside scale. They exist in a nowhere space.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

When I moved to Iowa from western Montana, I crossed the 100th meridian somewhere in South Dakota. At the time, I did not know the significance of this line, but when August came, I realized it was the first time I would not have to live through a fire season. Instead of smoke and hazy skies there was rain, and the landscape stayed green.

The 100th meridian roughly marks the arid-humid boundary in the continental United States, with a semi-arid climate to the west and a humid continental and subtropical climate to the east. The history of the United States and the migration of people was shaped by this divide. The repercussions of this are still visible in the population disparities across the country. To use my own experience as an example, Iowa is about the third of the size of Montana but has about three times the population.

The emptiness of the western United States had an impact on the art world as well, from the modernist painters, such as the Taos school and others who tried to capture the beauty of the light and landscape on canvas. Later in the late 1960’s, the land art movement turned the actual land into a canvas itself.

My thesis title, The Alien Landscape, was inspired by the way artists, mostly white artists, have treated the desert landscape, particularly of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Deserts are naturally hostile environments, with their lack of water and vegetation. It often makes for landscapes dominated by rock formations and little else. Many of the artists discussed in this paper such as Donald Judd and James Turrell, as well as contemporary figures such as Gisela Colon and arts organization Desert X all produce formalist art and engage in some form of minimalism. In other words, non-human art, and for me, the alien landscape is a non-human place.
When researching land artist Michael Heizer, I came across the quote, “size is real, scale is imaginary.” In a photograph the only imagery that matters is what fits inside the frame of the camera. It does not matter that every single one of these photos was shot in a parking lot, because it’s outside of the aspect ratio. It is also impossible to determine size, as there is no reliable outside scale. They exist in a nowhere space.

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CHAPTER 2.  EDGE OF THE WILD

Survey Photography in the West

Figure 1: Timothy O’Sullivan, *Canon de Chelle, NM*

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The immense sandstone walls in this Timothy O’Sullivan photograph overwhelm the composition, and the lack of horizon line makes them appear to go on forever. It would be impossible to tell their real size were it not for the ancient pueblo dwellings, nestled in the foreground of the frame. It provides a human comparison to hint at the scale. This photograph of the Canyon de Chelly was taken in 1873 as part of the Wheeler Survey, an expedition which documented the geology of the United States west of the 100th meridian. By turning his focus to the geology of the canyon walls, O’Sullivan was obscuring the recent history of his time.

In 1864, legendary frontiersman and US Army Officer, Kit Carson led an expedition through the Canyon de Chelly as part of an extensive campaign to deal with “the Navajo problem,” as recounted by historian Robert M. Utley in *Frontiersmen in Blue*:

“On this particular date [January 23, 1864] Carson could report only twenty-three Indians killed and two hundred sheep seized besides the crops and orchards destroyed, but the effect on the Navajo was decisive. At no time or place, they now saw, could they or their property be safe from Carson’s soldiers. In the six months before Canyon de Chelly, some two hundred had reached this conclusion and surrendered at Fort Canby or Fort Wingate for deportation to Bosque Redondo [an internment camp]. After Canyon de Chelly this trickle swelled to a flood. Five hundred people surrendered to Carson on his return march, and within three weeks nearly three thousand were camped around the two forts awaiting transportation eastward. Thus, the true significance of the Canyon de Chelly operation lay not in its destruction of property but in its impact as a symbol of Carleton’s unshakable determination to keep Carson at his task until every Navajo had accepted one of two alternatives: Bosque Redondo or death.”

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It is estimated that the canyon system including the Canyon de Chelly had been continuously inhabited for nearly 5,000 years—longer than anywhere else on the Colorado Plateau. The ruins in the photograph, while a record of Native American inhabitants, most commonly referred to as the “White House Ruins,” had been abandoned long before Carson made his raid through the area. The photograph, while monumental, creates the impression of an empty landscape, devoid of human livelihoods.

Little is known about the life of Timothy O’Sullivan, such as his date and place of birth. He was either born in Ireland or New York, but history is unsure. What is known, is that as a teenager, he worked for pioneering photographer Matthew Brady during the Civil War. In 1867, he joined the Geologic Exploration of the 40th Parallel which lasted from March 2, 1867 to March 3rd, 1869 and was led by geologist Clarence King. It was the first expedition of the West after the Civil War. Its purpose: “to document a swath of land eight hundred miles long by one hundred miles wide that ran along the Fortieth Parallel from Wyoming to Nevada, [as] demand for detailed knowledge about this landscape was high.” It went beyond chronicling the geologic history of the area, and included passages on ecology, topographic and stratigraphic maps, as well as photographs, all taken by Timothy O’Sullivan.

Jason Weems’s essay “Stratifying the West” analyzes the specific photograph of a Hot Spring in Ruby Valley, Nevada, and how O’Sullivan’s photographs could be surprisingly deceptive:

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8 Jason Weems, “Stratifying the West,” American Art; Summer 2015, Vol. 29 Issue 2, p36
“At first glance, the picture appears to typify the no-nonsense documentary approach so often associated with O'Sullivan's photography and, in a larger sense, King's survey. Matching the orientation of his eight-by-ten-inch glass plate camera to the barren flatness of the arid Nevada hardpan, O'Sullivan crafted a vision of insistent formal and topographic horizontality...The slight slope of the horizon line, which echoes the sprawl of the pool and the coarse lines of vegetation in the middle ground, cements the image's powerful sense of lateral vision...The explorer's downward gaze emblematizes this lack of visual penetration. As the figure tries to peer into the earth's depths, his gaze is cast back to his own horizontal reflection. For an image that--alongside the survey's extensive maps--was meant to clarify the facts of the landscape, O'Sullivan's photograph is remarkably opaque.”

Similar to the photograph of the Canyon de Chelly, which uses pueblo dwellings as a human reference, here a man reclines next to the pool for scale. Despite being a close up the history of the area is only hinted at by capturing a shadowy image of what lies beneath the surface. It is less preoccupied with the horizontal vista and instead skews down to try and capture the vertical. The landscape is obscured in favor of the mysterious, opaque pool, and the geologic past it represents. Just as the layered sandstone rock in the Canyon de Chelly blocks out the sky to create an overwhelming composition of rock, the hot spring pool of Ruby Nevada blocks out the story of the surrounding land. The cabin to the far left reveals that there are people on the land, but it too, is only there for scale.

Weems goes on to discuss how King’s geologic survey pioneered the new science of stratigraphy: “the study of the order and relative position of the earth’s layers. For King, the

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9 Jason Weems, “Stratifying the West,” American Art; Summer 2015, Vol. 29 Issue 2, p34
study of strata offered a means of conceptualizing the growing nation’s geologic makeup and understanding both its spatial and historical significance.”¹⁰ This resulted in a new kind of geologic map, and as opposed to a traditional map, it looked down at the vertical instead of the horizontal. The purpose of these surveys was to understand the natural resources of the West, mostly for mining, but O’Sullivan’s photograph similarly reveals a desire to capture the invisible underground. Weems argues that the hot spring photograph “probes the earth’s depths, only to be faced with a vision of subjective being. The photograph may be representative of geologic knowledge, yet it also maps out a set of human desires that remain beyond, or perhaps below, sight.”¹¹

In the following decades the West would be settled by white Americans from the East, and mining operations would follow. O’Sullivan’s collection of photographs represents a deeper fascination with the West than industry, but it still was more about geology than anthropology. The pattern of obscuring recent history in favor of the geologic past has often been repeated by artists who have come to explore the vast, empty landscape of the West, and this was only the beginning.

¹⁰ Jason Weems, “Stratifying the West,” American Art; Summer 2015, Vol. 29 Issue 2, p35
¹¹ Jason Weems, “Stratifying the West,” American Art; Summer 2015, Vol. 29 Issue 2, p41
Figure 2: Timothy O’Sullivan, *Hot Spring, Ruby Valley, NV*\(^{12}\)

Figure 3: Clarence King, *Longitudinal Elevation Virginia Mines*\(^{13}\)

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\(^{12}\) Timothy H. O’Sullivan, *Hot Spring, Ruby Valley, Nevada*, 1868, photograph, albumen silver print, 8 x 11 in., Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

CHAPTER 3. IN SITU

Donald Judd’s Corner of Texas

“Since everyone knows that nothing is accidental and that everything is fully planned, it’s not surprising that I sent a telegram saying: DEAR MOM VAN HORN TEXAS. 1260 POPULATION. NICE TOWN BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY MOUNTAINS—LOVE DON 1946 DEC 17 PM 5 45”

—Donald Judd 1985

In 1971, after several road trips around the southwest, Donald Judd decided, that out of all the small towns in west Texas, Marfa (pop. 2,466) was going to be the place to create his lasting artistic vison. He began by buying two abandoned WWI airplane hangars, which had at one point been used as a prison for captured Germans during the war. There is still a German inscription on one of the walls, which reads, “Den Kopf Benutzen ist bessar als ihn Verliern” (it is better to use your head than lose it). Judd described all of the buildings he purchased as “uninhabitable.”

By 1977, Marfa was Judd’s permanent residence. His vison for this corner of desert was to create a series of permanent exhibitions of his own work and other selected artists. After years of working in New York City, Judd decided that it was time to look for a new place to let his sculpture flourish. In the city, he found himself criticizing museums and galleries over and over again, for failing to address the importance of surrounding space, stating, “the space around my work is crucial to it.”

In 1968, he had purchased a 19th c. cast iron building in the SoHo neighborhood, where he lived and worked for twenty-five years; but it also doubled

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14 Marianne Stockebrand, *Chinati: The Visons of Donald Judd*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pg. 278
15 Marianne Stockebrand, *Chinati: The Visons of Donald Judd*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pg. 30
16 Marianne Stockebrand, *Chinati: The Visons of Donald Judd*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pg. 30
as an installation piece. It is still open to the public as a permanent exhibition of Judd’s design work. This was only the beginning, however, of Judd’s desire to set up permanent installations to have total control over his work.

The important word here is context. Judd believed that no work of art could be separated from the time and place where it was created. If “these contexts [were] dismantled and their fragments exported, their layers of meaning were lost as well. With the respect to the art of his time, he hoped that it would be possible to preserve ‘one large portion of contemporary thinking’ in an authentic fashion.” Judd was also “convinced of the outstanding quality of the art produced by his own generation and the one before it, and he repeatedly called for collecting and exhibiting a large number of works by each individual artist.” To Judd, they deserved special treatment, compared to the way most contemporary art spread out into different museums, depleting the impact of context.

When Judd set out to fix up the airplane hangars, it was certainly to repair them, but not convert them. They still feature exposed brick walls, concrete floors, and corrugated steel roofs. The architecture found in west Texas has an overall look of practicality. Most buildings are single stories and lack ornamentation. In other words, they fit Judd’s minimalist aesthetic perfectly.

By the late 1960’s, Minimalism was a fully established art movement. In both painting and sculpture, it was characterized by the reduction of forms to the “essential bare-bones of

17 Marianne Stockebrand, *Chinati: The Visons of Donald Judd*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pg. 19
18 Marianne Stockebrand, *Chinati: The Visons of Donald Judd*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pg. 19
geometric abstraction.”¹⁹ This resulted in the elimination of representational imagery, pedestals, and often, the touch of the artist. Many of Judd’s works were fabricated in industrial workshops.

The term minimalism has often been conflated with the color white, as if minimalist art at its height was devoid of color. The Marfa installations of Judd’s work, and others—particularly Don Flavin, are a testament to the fact that minimalism embraced color. David Batchelor addresses the issue in his book *Chromophobia*, stating:

“Donald Judd [would use] sometimes intrinsic colors, sometimes applied, sometimes both together, sometimes shiny, sometimes transparent, sometimes polished, sometimes matte…Which is to say: found colors, commercial colors, industrial colors, and often bright, vulgar, modern colors in bright, vulgar, modern collisions with other bright, vulgar, modern colors.”²⁰

The repaired industrial buildings of Marfa are a primary example of “found color,” because they were found structures, and remained true to their original building materials and color. The boxes that Judd installed remain true to their materiality: they are metal and concrete and left that way; there is color, but no applied color, just as the industrial airplane hangars do not even have a coat of paint over their walls.

For Judd, the open Western landscape provided the correct context for understanding his artwork. His raw materials matched the buildings he bought. The low-lying boxes mimic the traditional one-story buildings found in the surrounding Texas landscape. Both have a similar feeling of little structures placed on an enormous backdrop of earth and sky. Judd is often considered to be one of the main founders of Minimalism and was not the first or the last to bring

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the movement to the West. Monumental landscape artists, such as Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, and James Turrell, all made landscape works which embraced Judd’s foundational style.

Figure 4: Donald Judd, *100 Untitled Works in an Aluminum Mill*\(^\text{21}\)

Donald Judd did not coin the term minimalism and was always critical of it. The term first appeared in an influential *Art in America* article in 1965 by critic Barbara Rose. She described this new art as “pared down to the ‘minimum,’ and by the late 1960’s minimalism was commonly being used.” Throughout his career, he often refused to elaborate on the subject. Instead, he issued statements such as “what’s minimal about it?” and that it was “empirical” instead of minimal.

As a movement, minimalism is considered to have lasted from the 1960’s to the mid 1970’s, but as a style it endured. In later sections of this paper, the work of living contemporary artists,

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artists who are working in the style of minimalism will be referred to as minimalist artists, even though the movement is generally recognized as having ended. The style generally refers to any artist whose work is reductive in quality and embraces basic geometric forms. Like the original minimalist artists, this also includes the elimination of representational imagery and the use of pedestals. For sculpture, this reduction refers to both surface and form. In the case of specific artists, this definition will be elaborated upon further.

Judd’s three-dimensional works will also be referred to as sculpture here, even though he stated many times that his work was not sculpture. In a recent exhibition of Judd’s work at the Modern Museum of Art in New York, curator Ann Tempkin addressed this in an interview, stating, “I think today we would all agree that his work is sculpture, so we have to historically contextualize that term.” Tempkin explains that when Judd entered the art world, sculpture was still seen as the human form, often placed on a pedestal, and made by hand, which was why Judd had such a resistance to the term. He did not want his boxes to be stand in for figures or pedestals, and none of his work was made by hand. Tempkin argues that today Judd’s work is viewed as sculpture not because the work changed, but, because his work was so influential, the definition of sculpture changed.

The Desert Earthworks

In 1986, Michael Heizer’s monumental sculpture, Double Negative, was acquired by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, but the museum was specifically instructed by the artist to let “the sculpture be reclaimed by natural forces [and] do nothing to the piece as far as upkeep and…let it erode as he intended.” It is located 80 miles outside of Las Vegas on the

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Mormon Mesa in Nevada. For those intending to visit the artwork, the museum provides the following warning:

“From Los Angeles, allow seven hours for travel and please note the last 45 minutes is on dirt roads. A four-wheel drive vehicle is recommended under current road conditions. Prepare for conditions of extreme heat with no shade (especially in the summer months)—always bring water, a hat, and sunscreen. Use caution, avoid traveling alone, and notify an outside party of your departure and estimated arrival time for safety.”

_Double Negative_ consists of two massive vertical cuts out of the landscape. It is not so much a sculpture as an absence of what used to be there. It is the inverse of Donald Judd’s boxes, but on an immense scale. It goes beyond eliminating representation to making a sculpture out of what is not there.

The remoteness of _Double Negative_ is a common trait shared among the major earthwork sculptures of the Western United States. Robert Smithson’s _Spiral Jetty_ is a three-hour drive from Salt Lake City, Utah, but a road had to be built out to its remote location on the Great Salt Lake. Charles Ross’s unfinished _Star Axis_ is in an undisclosed location in the New Mexico desert, near Chaco Canyon (the fact that the location remained private should speak to its remoteness). James Turrell’s _Roden Crater_, also unfinished, is located in the Painted Desert in northern Arizona, with no nearby townships. Not to be outdone, Michael Heizer also has an unfinished project, _City_, located in Basin Range National Monument (which was created in 2010). Heizer chose this place for its “remote location, severe beauty, and profound silence” to

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create a piece that could never “be experienced within a museum.”

All of these examples of earthworks inspire visions of pilgrimage. They cannot be removed from their environments because they are part of them. They are the ultimate example of the kind of permanent installation work Donald Judd desired to create in Marfa.

These examples incorporate the geometric abstraction foundational to minimalism, but also create their own formations on the landscape. Double Negative is a man-made rectangular canyon. Spiral Jetty is a spiraled arm of dirt in Great Salt Lake that can be seen from satellite imagery. Both Charles Ross and James Turrell created natural planetariums in the desert. Star Axis features a staircase, excavated into the side of a mesa, with a window fixed on Polaris, the north star, and a second window fixed on “Gamma Cephei, in the constellation Cepheus, cued up to become the next North Star about 2,000 years from now.” Roden Crater is a natural crater, which Turrell has transformed into a natural planetarium. For example, one southwest window will only show the moon every 18.6 years, when the moon is at a lower lunar standstill. Heizer’s City is a series of complexes, made of reinforced concrete, packed earth, and inspired by ancient structures, such as Mayan pyramids on the Yucatan peninsula and the stepped pyramid of Zoser, in Egypt. The work is also in conversation with Nevada’s recent history of being a nuclear testing site as Complex I “includes a wall capable of withstanding a nuclear blast—a minor fortress…the work is meant to outlast not only its maker but also humanity.”

City brings to mind post-apocalyptic ruins, of a disaster which has not happened yet.

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While art in general is created with the intention of outlasting the creator, these examples of earthworks are quite different. They are all concerned with time, and lasting, ostensibly “forever,” but without the general preservation most artworks need. Unlike a painting or a statue, which might be kept in a climate-controlled museum, these structures were meant to survive the elements. *Star Axis* will observe the shift of the polar stars 2,000 years from now. *Roden Crater* is scheduled to observe similar cosmic events, beyond the calendar of human life. *City* could survive a nuclear blast. *Spiral Jetty* and *Double Negative* have already started eroding. The jetty was submerged under the Great Salt Lake for many years, but due to recent droughts has mostly been visible again. As the West has been facing longer droughts, it may last even longer than Smithson intended. Erosion is a key component of the geologic cycle, which lasts much longer than human life spans, so these sculptures, too, exist on a timeline which is beyond one human’s experience.

By removing subject matter, minimalist artists sought to create an aesthetic which could feel universal and timeless. In the West, these particular artists found that the vast, dry, and undeveloped landscape could become their canvas for making art which existed on this plane. Instead of dealing with the human life span, they engage with geology and cosmology, to try and create a glimpse into deep time.
Figure 6: Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*  

Figure 7: Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*  

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[https://www.diaart.org/visit/visit-our-locations-sites/robert-smithson-spiral-jetty](https://www.diaart.org/visit/visit-our-locations-sites/robert-smithson-spiral-jetty)
Figure 8: Charles Ross, *Star Axis*[^34]

Figure 9: Michael Heizer, *City*[^35]


[^35]: Michael Heizer, *City*, 1972 (unfinished), Nevada
Figure 10: Michael Heizer, *City*\textsuperscript{36}

Figure 11: James Turrell, *Roden Crater*\textsuperscript{37}


\textsuperscript{36} Michael Heizer, *City*, 1972 (unfinished), Nevada


Figure 12: James Turrell, *Roden Crater*\(^{38}\)

Figure 13: James Turrell, *Roden Crater; The Crater’s Eye*\(^{39}\)

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38 James Turrell, *Roden Crater*, 1979 (unfinished), Painted Desert, Arizona

Site Specific, Not Place Specific

Lucy R. Lippard is an acclaimed author, curator, and activist in the art world, and her book *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* is a wide-ranging look at the Western United States and its relationship to art. She has been writing about the art world long enough to observe changing opinions about land art and certain patterns which occurred throughout the movement:

“Somewhere in an indeterminate time zone between the Old and New West loom the massive outdoor sculptures dubbed earthworks in the late 1960’s, now more broadly defined as land art. In the U.S., the best known of these sculptures drawn or cut from the earth itself, or made from its products, are Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, Nancy Holt’s *Sun Tunnels*, Walter de Maria’s *Lightning Field*, Charles Ross’s *Star Axis*, James Turrell’s *Roden Crater*, and Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative* and *City Complex*—titles indicative of the ambitious visions driving them. All of the artists are white; all but one are men (sporting cowboy boots and ten gallon hats), as it is rare for women artists (Holt is the exception) to raise the thousands of dollars it takes to create such monumental works. Three of those listed above focus on the heavens; three have been under construction for some thirty years; one has been changed constantly by its forty-year existence. All are endowed with extraordinarily beautiful surroundings and enhanced by weather, seasons, light and shadow. They surrender scale to the adjacent spaces, while drawing their emotional power from distance—distance from people, from environmental issues, and even from places. Land art tends to be site-specific but not overly place specific. Local geology, history, and identity are secondary, if acknowledged at all. Local residents are considered primarily in their roles as workers and incidental audiences. The
on-site viewer is as likely to be deeply affected by the landscape as by the art object. It is this combination that is so compelling.”

As Lippard observes, when looking at all of these artists together, it is impossible not to notice that all of them are white, and most of them were artists from the east who came west to seek a new kind of art. The exception is James Turrell, a native of California who was never involved in the New York art scene, even though he now has installation pieces all over the world. Even so, the other uniting factor between all these projects was that at one point in time, they were all funded in some part by the Dia Art Foundation, which is headquartered in New York City. Lippard points out in the case of Nancy Holt (who was Robert Smithson’s wife), it has been difficult for women artists to obtain the funding required for such large-scale projects all of these artists achieved. None of them happened without external revenue, and each artist was established before these ambitious projects were able to get off the ground. Dia was also central to the funding of Donald Judd’s permanent installations in Marfa, Texas, and the creation of the subsequent Chinati Foundation. Even though these monumental projects exist in remote locations, their roots still stem from New York.

In the 1870’s, Timothy O’Sullivan travelled out West and turned his camera to the canyon walls of New Mexico and captured something beyond his time as well. The stories of the Navajos who were forced out of the canyon have passed on, but those walls are still there. This geologic exploration was also comprised solely of white men, and they too, were funded with money from the East (this time Washington) to create a survey of the West which could serve future generations. A hundred years later, white artists born out of the minimalist movement came to the West with the same visions of touching eternity and continued the pattern of ignoring

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local history in favor of something bigger and less human. The land art which came out of this movement was created for future generations, but it is a futuristic vision as vast as the deep geologic past.

While these sites may inspire travelers to make art pilgrimages, monumental landscape art is still deeply indebted to photography. Lippard states about these remote places: “most of us envision rather than visit the classic sites, where open space becomes a kind of mat within a frame around the photograph. Even if we have actually seen them, our impressions are mediated by the glamourous aerial photographs in publications, which are critical to earth art’s aesthetic impact and dissemination.”\textsuperscript{41} Commercial publications of photographs have kept landscape art in the public imagination as beautiful places.

At the heart of minimalism is the rejection of subject matter and representation. It is the distillation of shape, form, and light. Boxes, spirals, pyramids, and cylinders; these shapes of basic geometry were the starting point for many of these artists, and then scaled up to fit onto the landscape. They have no pop-culture references, no figural representation, and they do not tell stories. Just as Heizer’s \textit{Double Negative} is absence as sculpture, these pieces are about what is missing, and what remains is supposed to be universal, everlasting, and beyond time, place, and culture. Minimalist sculptures match the landscape best when a place is also read as timeless and unchanging, or at least changing on such a slow scale it is beyond a human lifetime. Rocks may erode, and the northern star may shift over time, but these changes are so vast they have to be imagined.

The landscape works populating the West were made with every intention of being universal and everlasting, but they also belong to a specific moment in time in the art world.

Michael Heizer, James Turrell, and Charles Ross are the remaining artists of this movement, and they all have grand unfinished works not yet open to the public. Their work is a remnant of the greater movement of the 1960’s, and while it left a mark on the art the world, respect for them has diminished. Even when Double Negative was first completed in 1970, one critic described it as “marring the very land, which we have just learned to stop doing.”\textsuperscript{42} In the end, even though there are 48 million acres of public land in Nevada, there was only so much room and tolerance for so many Double Negatives to exist in the West.

CHAPTER 4. PALEOFUTURISM

Figure 14: Donald Judd at the Whitney, 1968

The Black Monolith

In the spring of 1968, the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City had a career retrospective of Donald Judd’s work, bringing together over thirty pieces, made between 1963 and 1968. Although it showed off the variety of materials that Judd worked with, from sheet metal, to plastic and wood, the shapes on display were quite repetitive. Everything was a

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variation on a box. There were stacked rectangular wall pieces, single pieces that looked like shelves, metal boxes all in a row, and more and more variations on the cube. In the same year, an image which could have been designed by Donald Judd appeared in an explosive piece of pop culture; the iconic black monolith in Stanley Kubrick’s film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The movie begins with an extended sequence in the distant past, during the time of cave men. The early hominids are visited by rectangular black monolith; at first, they are afraid, but fear eventually turns to veneration. Afterwards, they experience a jump in evolution and begin using bones as tools and weapons. Then in a dramatic time transition, a bone-club is thrown in the air, where it transforms into a satellite.

In his essay “Monolith in a Hollow: Paleofuturism and Earth Art in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey,*” author Jacob Wamberg argues that “Kubrick’s film and Smithson’s earth art foreground[ed] different sides of the same paradigm, one in which the deep past and deep future become entangle[ed] through continuities and mirroring;” a movement which he terms as “paleofuturism.” He also notes that “as it appears in the raw stony hollow in either primordial Africa or on a futuristic moon, the black monolith, *2001*’s central symbol and catalyst of evolutionary leaps forward, resembles something that could have been created by earth artists and minimalists such as Smithson, Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheimer, or Sol LeWitt.”45 In fact, the plain, rectangular black monolith would not have been so out of place in Judd’s retrospective show of the same year.

The black monolith manages to capture not just the superficial look of minimalism, but also its core spirit. Wamberg goes on to argue that “what binds *2001* to these art movements, deepening the paleofuturist constellation, is a common anti-anthropocentrism that bypasses the

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organic human body, and a shared preference for the inorganic that could be approached through Smithson’s key concept of entropy, a sort of collapsed sublime.”

It resembles an ancient standing stone in form but is futuristic in material.

Ancient, paleolithic art often raises more questions than it answers. There are many ideas but few solid answers as to the purpose of many ancient monuments. Even the most studied, such as Stonehenge, have many theories as to their function, whether religious or otherwise. It is easy to project ideas onto these forms and imagine how ancient people built certain structures without the use of modern machinery. There must be answers and techniques lost to time. Similarly, when looking to the future, it is easy to imagine that humans will have new knowledge and make new discoveries which would be impossible for people today to understand. At the end of 2001 the astronaut David Bowman is reborn when he passes through the monolith, and, as described by Kubrick, is reborn as “an enhanced human being, a star child, an angel, a superman if you like, and returns to the earth prepared for the next leap forward of man’s evolutionary destiny.”

The film ends with an image of a fetus hovering over the earth in outer space.

Even though the monolith comes back, it is never fully explained. It remains a mystery. Minimalist art at its core rejects representational imagery, and by extension narrative and sequential art. It is inscrutable instead of illustrative. Instead of explaining the intention of the monolith, 2001 forces the viewer to contemplate unanswerable questions. Contemporary artists working in the style of minimalism continue to operate in this space of mystery and the sublime.

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Figure 15: Robert Smithson, Proposal for a Monument at the Red Sea\textsuperscript{48}

Figure 16: The Black Monolith\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{48} Robert Smithson, Proposal for a Monument at the Red Sea, 1966 black and white photograph, New Jersey, private collection

Light and Space

“The airplane has revealed for us the true face of the Earth”—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

James Turrell spent seven months flying around the Western United States before he found the Roden Crater—the site of his land art magnum opus. The Roden Crater was built to be a natural planetarium, to observe certain celestial events. Its specific location in Arizona was chosen for its exceptional quality of light. Not only is it a high-altitude desert, but it is also far away from any cities with light pollution. An avid pilot, Turrell has logged over 12,000 hours of flight time, so it only makes sense that he considers the sky to be his canvas in many of his works. Although Turrell did not found the Light and Space movement in the art world, he is widely regarded as the figure who has spread it around the world.

In 2001 Turrell completed the “Live Oaks Friends Meeting House” in Houston, Texas, which is used as a Quaker meeting house. It features a rectangular cut-out in the ceiling, echoing the shape and size of a painting, except the artwork is the sky. Turrell grew up a Quaker but claims he had not been practicing for nearly twenty-five years when he was commissioned to design the meeting house. In an interview with Art 21, he does recall an early memory of going to a Quaker meeting being described by his grandmother as “greeting the light.” Although that statement can have several spiritual meanings, in this space, it becomes literal, as the sky is brought into the space. Turrell has completed over eighty sky spaces, and all of them play with human perception of color and light, and trying to make light itself a piece of art.

Before Turrell there were other Light and Space artists, such as Dan Flavin, who is one of the artists Donald Judd selected to have a permanent installation at his foundation in Marfa, Texas. His signature neon tubes emit soft pastel lights, which emerge mysteriously out of white walled tunnels. Like Turrell, these light installations create a signature space, where it is not just about looking at a piece of art but being enveloped in its light.

Though its own category, the Light and Space Movement is still a branch of minimalism. Flavin’s clean neon tubes, which bounce light off of the clean white walls, share a visual similarity with the reductivity of minimalism. Turrell goes beyond eliminating representation from art; visual perception of light and shifting color becomes the artwork in the place of physical objects.

Apart from the more obvious Quaker meeting house, Turrell’s work has deep connections to spirituality. Despite his personal connections to growing up as a Quaker he himself defines his work as spiritual rather than being connected to any specific religion. In an interview about the Live Oaks meeting house, Turrell stated:

“I want to feel light physically. We drink it as vitamin D; it’s actually a food. We are heliotropic. And it has a big effect on the skin; it produces vitamin D. We also have a big psychological relation to light. All or most spiritual experiences, near-death experiences, are described with a vocabulary of light. So, for me, this quality to feel light exists, almost like we see it in a dream.”

All of his work creates spaces for contemplation and increasing the awareness of our perception of light. It is slow and meditative and even sublime. Although this is a slightly antiquated notion in art, as it was an important part of the Romantic movement, Turrell’s work

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https://art21.org/read/james-turrell-live-oak-friends-meeting-house/
fits the definition. The sublime generally refers to “the realm of experience beyond the measurable and so beyond the rational, produced especially by the terrors and grandeur of natural phenomenon.”

Light is a natural phenomenon, unmeasurable to the human eye, and his works embrace its sense of grandeur and spirituality. Like the sublime, minimalism in general, embraces the inhuman, and in different applications attempts to reach new spiritual heights, similar to the awe-inspiring work Turrell has produced throughout his career.

Figure 17: Dan Flavin, *Untitled* at Marfa

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One day, in the midst of the sandstone canyons of Al Ula, Saudi Arabia there appeared trampolines set into the ground, neon-colored rocks dotting the brown landscape, a futuristic black pyramid with a neon pink canyon inside, and more surreal happenings.

Desert X is an artist organization which has hosted biennial art exhibitions in the Coachella Valley of southern California since 2017. In February of 2020, they expanded internationally to Saudi Arabia, and hosted a desert exhibition in the Al Ula desert with sculptures and installations. It was an unusual exhibition for Saudi Arabia, which completely funded the venture. The country has ambitious plans to turn the area into a tourist destination by founding a nature preserve and establishing an arts district in the area. Unlike Judd’s installations at Marfa, all of the exhibitions hosted by Desert X are temporary. Like the music festival that made the Coachella Valley famous, the artwork that has been hosted by Desert X are an event.

Figure 18: James Turrell, *Skyscape at Live Oak Friends Meeting House*\(^{56}\)

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Saudi Arabia, the event was part of a larger vision to bring “two million tourists by 2035”\(^{57}\) to the area. Judd wanted to bring together artists who were his contemporaries to establish permanent exhibitions to preserve them for the future, but the Desert X artworks are here today, gone tomorrow.

Inside a white walled gallery these pieces would still be strange and surreal, but when placed out in the desert, they begin to take on the appearance of otherworldly visitations. From above, Manal Al Dowayan’s trampolines look like puddles dotting the canyon floor and Jeddah-based artist Zahrah Al Ghamdi created a sparkling river in the desert sand made out of 6,000 date containers. The inhospitable desert is made even more so when puddles are made out of rubber and rivers are made out of metal. Gisela Colon’s parabolic monoliths echo natural rock structures, but are turned into perfectly symmetrical geometric shrines, made out of reflective, shiny surfaces that contrast boldly against the brown canyon walls. “Concise Passage” takes the shape of a stone step pyramid, and turns it into a black and metallic structure, split down the middle revealing a glowing, neon pink passageway inside. They are recreations of natural phenomenon translated into unnatural materials.\(^{58}\)

Although this exhibition is not permanent, it still speaks to 1960’s movement of monumental earthworks. None of the Desert X works were made with the earth itself, like *Spiral Jetty* and *Double Negative*, but they are still highly influenced by a minimalist aesthetic. Placed against the desert rocks, the stark geometry of the sculptures is emphasized. Manal Al Dowayan’s trampolines are perfect circles set into the ground. “Concise Passage” is a step pyramid, split symmetrically down the middle. Lebanese artist Rayyane Tabet’s *Steel Rings* is a


series of metal steel rings set up in a straight line, which is meant to explore the history of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline. Even Colon’s parabolic monolith is a perfect geometric form, even though the parabola is unusual in the history of minimalism. Like Judd’s concrete and steel boxes at Marfa, these artworks are true in color and surface texture to their true materials, metal is metal, and rubber is rubber. Concise Passage uses light in a similar way to Dan Flavin’s installations in Marfa, as it uses colored neon light to light up a mysterious passageway that is framed with geometric shapes. Like the structures at Marfa, the concise geometry of these structures is emphasized by the vast natural desert landscape. Steel Rings and Concise Passage may allude to real things, such as a pipeline and step-pyramids, but overall, they still reject representational imagery in favor of perfect geometry.

Concise Passage has a direct connection to paleofuturism, as the step pyramid, such as the one of Zoser in Egypt, is one of the oldest known architectural monuments. Here, the proto pyramid is recreated with a glowing pink interior and a shiny black impenetrable outside. The ancient past has found its way into the imagined space age future.

Figure 19: Zarah Al Ghamdi’s Desert X Installation

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Figure 20: Manal Al Dowayan, *Now You See Me, Now You Don’t*

Figure 21: Manal Al Dowayan, *Now You See Me, Now You Don’t*[^60]

Figure 22: Rashed Al Shashai, *Concise Passage*\(^6^1\)

Figure 23: Gisela Colon, *The Future is Now*\(^6^2\)

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Organic Minimalism

Gisela Colon is a Puerto Rican artist based out of California who identifies herself as an artist working in the style of “organic minimalism.” In her work, the aesthetic ideas behind Donald Judd’s boxes have been translated into blobs and parabolas. She was one of the artists featured in the Desert X exhibition at Al Ula, where they described her “practice of organic minimalism” as an:

“explora[tion] of intangible connections between the Earth and the cosmos, hinting at the energy that pervades all things visible and invisible. [They] are physical manifestations of vital energy sourced from the Earth and beyond, purposefully channeled into sleek objects that become conduits of transmutation and transformation, emanating radiant energy. While their outward appearance is high-tech, space-age, and futuristic, they are also visceral, primitive, and reminiscent of ancient cultural artifacts.”

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Colon’s work is also a continuation of the Light and Space Movement in art, alongside the work of artists such as James Turrell and Don Flavin. Unlike Don Flavin’s industrial shaped neon tubes and James Turrell’s light installations, Colon’s sculptures do not include actual light sources. Instead, they refract and reflect light. Apart from the monoliths, Colon has a series of wall sculptures she refers to as “pods,” made out of blow-molded acrylic plastic. They appear to pulsate with life, like strange prosaic creatures.

For her parabolic monoliths, Colon turned to the world of aerospace engineering for her materials. The monoliths are made out of engineered carbon fiber, which is used in the production of airplanes and space shuttles. It allowed her to work on a larger scale than her previous work. This endless curved surface, combined with Colon’s reflective plastic material, creates the illusion that they are impenetrable, and the pointed parabola is reminiscent of an aerodynamic shooting bullet.

To revisit the basic definition of minimalism as defined earlier in this thesis, it embraces basic geometric forms, rejects representational imagery, and has a general reduction of surface and form. Parabolas are geometric, even though they are not angular. While the “pods” are not symmetrical, they also are not representational and are still generally reductive. Right angles do not exist in nature, and part of the beauty of Donald Judd’s boxes at Marfa is their juxtaposition against the sweeping Texas landscape. Inside of a gallery they are contained in a geometric space; the contrast makes them come alive.

Colon’s sculptures do not use right angles, but they are also not natural. It is the lack of angular geometry that makes them feel non-human. Organic minimalism in general embraces the unnatural, the otherworldly, and even the alien.
CHAPTER 5. THE ALIEN LANDSCAPE

My thesis work consists of photographs of ceramic sculptures. Many of them vaguely resemble landscapes, but no landscape that could ever exist. The goal was not to create a trompe l’oeil effect, but instead surreal tableaus, which exist in their own time and space.

It was also important to photograph these objects in voids, or backgrounds which were free of any information. Most often this means the sky, preferably without clouds, but I also used a rock wall, and a canvas backdrop. Without any outside information it makes it impossible to tell how big any piece is, where they are, or what the surrounding landscape looks like. Pieces are big or small compared to each other, but this does not reveal their actual size.

The short story “A Tranquil Star,” by the Italian writer and physicist Primo Levi succinctly captures how language falls short when describing size, in this case a star:

“Not even with superlatives does one get very far: how many times as high as a high tower is a very high tower? Nor can we hope for help from disguised superlatives, like “immense,” “colossal,” “extraordinary”: to relate the things that we want to relate here, these adjectives are hopelessly unsuitable, because the star we started from was ten times as big as our sun, and the sun is “many” times as big and heavy as our Earth, whose size so overwhelms our own dimensions that we can represent it only with a violent effort of the imagination. There is, of course, the slim and elegant language of numbers, the alphabet of the powers of ten, but then this would not be a story in the sense in which it wants to be a story; that is, a fable that awakens echoes, and in which each of us can perceive distant reflections of himself and of the human race.”

https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/02/12/a-tranquil-star
Normally we think of big or small as compared to a human scale, but this is not a real way to describe an object as being “very big” or “very old.” In my photos they exist in a state of the unknown.

The name “The Alien Landscape” means not natural, inhuman, and other. Artists like Donald Judd and Michael Heizer turned to the Western United States as a representation of a non-human place. Even the survey photographers of the 1800’s treated the West as an inhospitable place. Of course, these places had a human history, even though it did not factor into their outlook.

In my photographic series I was more interested in creating an imaginary place, an impossible landscape, rather than painting over an existing one. These extraterrestrial qualities create an overall contemplative mood, and even engage in the sublime, in the traditional sense of the word. They exist somewhere between awe, terror, and beauty.

![Pink Triangles](image)

Figure 25: *Pink Triangles*  

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The Blue Shift

In 1969, American linguists Brent Berlin and Paul Kay published their groundbreaking study on color, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*. Out of 88 languages and dialects they studied there was no example of a color-blind language. They also found that all languages progressed in the same chronological order of naming colors. All basic languages had at least black and white, and red always came next. As summarized by Leonard Shalin in *Art and Physics*:

“As societies advanced and added to their vocabularies, the words for color followed the spectrum of visible light from red to blue. Only the most mature languages, belonging to the most sophisticated civilizations, does a separate word for the color blue make an appearance, and usually it does so very late in the culture’s development.”

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Red for humans has always been a primordial color; it is the color of energy, vitality, and life. Blue on the other hand has always been associated with lethargy, sadness, and calm. This was even expressed scientifically in Isaac Newton’s 1704 *Optiks*. His analysis of light described red as the “strongest color,” as it was the least bent and violet as the “weakest and darkest,” as it was the most easily directed by refracting surfaces.

Today we know that not all wavelengths of light are in the visible spectrum, and it would not be until 1801 that another scientist, Joshua Ritter would discover invisible “black light” or ultraviolet radiation, the light rays responsible for causing sunburn. This important discovery: “reversed the traditional order of the color energy—the shorter the wavelength, the higher the energy. Ultraviolet, nearest to blue, has a shorter wavelength and therefore a higher energy to infrared, whose longer wavelength is adjacent to red.”

We learn our most basic color theory as children—the six colors of the rainbow are bifurcated into two categories. On one side are the warm colors: red, orange, and yellow. On the other are the cool colors: blue, purple and green. This basic interpretation stays with us for all of our lives. One side of the color wheel is fire, and the other side is ice. The world of physics inverts this assumption, and instead proves that red, with its longer wavelengths, is lower energy than violet, with its shorter wavelength.

Art students also learn that warm colors advance, while cool colors recede. This in turn, affects the way composition is taught, and even though art education does not focus on academic training the way it did pre-modernism, this is still a general rule. Blue, after all, is the color of the sky and implies atmospheric perspective. As Leonard Shalin recounts in his chapter on color in *Art and Physics*:

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70 Yes, six. The idea that there are seven is a falsehood passed down from Newton.
“A casual perusal of any art book containing pre-1860 art confirms the preference for red-brown colors to blue-violet ones. Sir Joshua Reynolds, a conservative academic painter, held that blue should be restricted to background sky and water, and taught his students that it must not be used in the foreground of a painting.”

A charming anecdote in art history came about because of this, when Thomas Gainsborough decided to challenge this convention by creating a still famous painting:

“When his leading rival of the day, Thomas Gainsborough, a freer spirit, learned about Reynold’s dogma, he promptly created the first predominately blue painting, The Blue Boy (1770), in order to prove that an artist could, from a compositional standpoint, use blue in the foreground.”

The ceramic pieces in Alien Landscape were left unsurfaced for months, before I decided upon the color blue. Originally, I did not have a photograph in mind, and after these tower-like forms, I was unsure how to display them. Eventually, the idea of an electric blue landscape came to mind, precisely because it felt so alien and unnatural. I had a photograph composition in mind, but I did not want to try to create a trompe l’oeil’ effect. I wanted it to clearly be strange, unnatural, and also staged. Although a lot of the pieces in this series use the sky as a background, this one is an exception, because there is a wall of red-brown rock, slightly out of focus in the background. In the extreme foreground are the blue, coil-built towers, which overwhelm the composition with their verticality. Not only does it reverse the concept of cool colors receding and warm colors advancing, but it is also an inverse of the usual landscape. Red is in the background, while blue, the color of the sky, is in the foreground.

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Alien Landscape is a bit of an outlier in the series, as one of the few pieces that does not use the sky as a blank background, but blue does reappear several times, where it is treated as a high energy color, by which I mean it is intense in hue, almost neon, and is strong part of the composition. In Pink Towers and Neon Mountains there are no clouds, and but the pieces were also photographed from a low angle, to center them against the center of the sky, instead of at the horizon, which is often lighter in color. Even though the ceramic pieces are an unnatural blue because no landscape would ever be such a color, I also wanted to capture the sky at its most intense to illustrate how even colors which are labeled as ‘unnatural’ in an art context for not being earth tones, do still exist in nature.

This piece also became an abstract illustration of the discovery that red is actually lower energy than blue, from a scientific standpoint. It’s the opposite of what was assumed, and can be observed by the human eye, yet it is still true.

Figure 27: Pink Towers I

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73 Jasmine Beul, Pink Towers, 2020, Digital Photography
Figure 28: *Neon Mountains*\textsuperscript{74}

Figure 29: *Sunset Strip I*\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{74} Jasmine Beul, *Neon Mountains*, 2020, Digital Photography

\textsuperscript{75} Jasmine Beul, *Sunset Strip*, 2020, Digital Photography
Figure 30: Visible Light Spectrum\textsuperscript{76}

Figure 31: Map of Federal Land in the United States\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{76} “Visible Light Spectrum.” California Light Works. 

Chlorophyll

West of the 100\textsuperscript{th} meridian, which runs through the middle of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, and so on, rainfall drops. The population decreases, as does agriculture and livestock. This climate shaped the history of the United States as the pattern of states to join the union was a steady shift from east to west, until California became a state during the gold rush of 1849, leaving the western states in the middle to get filled in later.

It is a legacy which remains today. According to the \textit{World Population Review}, in 2015 California had a population density of 251 people per square mile, whereas its neighbor Nevada, had a density of only 26 people per square mile.\textsuperscript{78} Of all the western states, Nevada is probably the most desolate. The lack of water and land suited for agriculture and livestock left most of the land to be purchased by the federal government. A New York Times article from 2016 reported that there are 48 million acres of public land in Nevada, or 63\% of the state which is managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Michael Heizer’s still unfinished magnum opus \textit{City} is today part of Basin Range National Monument, which was established in 2015. After a plan was proposed in 2010 by federal lawmakers to build a rail line for the purpose of removing nuclear waste from nearby Yucca Mountain, which would run next to \textit{City} Heizer contemplated demolishing his life’s work, rather than having a rail line run next to it. The plan never came to fruition as a Nevada senator, Harry Reid, introduced, and passed, legislation to protect Garden Valley, and nearby Coal Valley. The landscape of Garden and Coal Valley is described as “stark beauty,” but as Senator Reid put it, the Nevada desert is a place where “there’s no water, few animals and the landscape is harsh and beautiful…there’s nowhere in the state of Nevada more representative…Why

wouldn’t we protect this place?” The Nevada desert became Heizer’s muse, studio, and canvas, just as it did for so many other monumental landscape artists in the United States. And where else could a work like City have been made besides this inhospitable place.

Throughout my own series of work, there is one notable color exception: green. Green, if anything, is the color of life. When leaves change in the fall, they lose all of their chlorophyll, and change from green to red, orange, and brown. Green landscapes are an indication of water and life in general. The dry and desolate landscape of Nevada inspired Michael Heizer’s life’s work, and in my own work, I abolished the color green to create similarly inhospitable environments. It appears in bits and pieces—Neon Mountains has a splash of chartreuse, and the occasional photo features a touch of grass, but it is never the focus.

City is still closed to the public, and Heizer was reluctant to allow in visitors before it was finished. This means that all of the available photos of City are totally devoid of people. It is unlikely that such a remote place will ever become a bustling tourist attraction, but so far there have been no opportunities for any kind of visitors besides workers, and also writers, such as Dana Goodyear who wrote an in-depth profile on Michael Heizer for the New Yorker in 2016. The article presents striking photos of the different complexes set against the desert background, but they appear to already exist in a post-apocalyptic world, with no people or vegetation. Everything besides the cloudless desert sky is brown and inorganic.

**Color as Alien**

At the conception of this series, I was not purposefully avoiding the color green, but it became a clear pattern by the end. It is perhaps lazy and not insightful to use the word ‘intuitive’ to describe one’s artistic process, as it implies a lack of rationale and effort. In the world of

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conceptual art, the ideas behind a piece can trump the virtue of the visual outcome. A discussion of color, however, invites contradictions and irrationality, and it is perhaps impossible to avoid the word ‘intuitive.’

David Batchelor’s book *Chromophobia* is an in depth look at such contractions. He argues that:

“Since Antiquity, color has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded. Generations of philosophers, artists, art historians and cultural theorists of one stripe or another have kept this prejudice alive, warm, fed and groomed. As with all prejudices, its manifest form, its loathing, masks a fear: fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable. This loathing of color, this fear of corruption through color, needs a name: chromophobia.”

In my own experience, much of my past work is much less colorful because I was encouraged to surface my pieces that way. Ceramics by nature is divided into two processes: form and surface. Form, of course, comes first, and generally, the next step is to fire it once, and then refire it with a surface application. Normally, this is when a piece is glazed, but most of my pieces in this series were surfaced with underglaze, which is only a color application, resulting in a dry matte surface, which is not hard or weatherproof. I also used alternative techniques, such as latex paint, to create a similar matte surface. Ceramics is a versatile medium, and it is nothing new to have bright colors married to ceramic forms. There is perhaps though, a less serious and traditional tone to these pieces than maybe a wood fired piece, or any other surface drained of color.

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For example, these past pieces of mine which were wood fired did not even have glaze applied to them, but instead the wood ash from the kiln gets hot enough to become its own glaze. In this case, where the surface is less colorful, the piece is all about the form, and in a way more serious, and about the traditional ceramics process.

Batchelor continues to argue that the result of ‘chromophobia’ is the purging of color, and this has been done by relegating it to the “realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic…it is perceived merely as a secondary quality of experience and thus unworthy of serious consideration.” In my own piece, color was not used to make the piece more serious, and color would have been a superficial distraction. Of course, this piece did not need color, and it is maybe a stronger piece without it, but I was always interested in color, and there was a specific piece during my undergraduate studies when I reintroduced color back into my work, and I did it with a rainbow color palette.

If ceramics is a combination of surface and form, turning these pieces into photographs makes everything surface. Flattening them literally brings the color to the forefront and eliminates shape, volume, and mass. The pieces are now all surface. Most of them exist in ‘nowhere spaces’ where there is no depth or information in the background, the composition is totally defined by color.

Although we have generally accepted color terms, color is still an uneasy cultural agreement, because it is subjective to a viewer’s experience. The problem of describing color though, is that it exists beyond language, as described by Batchelor:

“In being indivisible, color also put itself beyond the reach of rational analysis—and this was exactly his point. To analyze, after all, is to divide. If color is indivisible, a

81 David Batchelor, Chromophobia, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000), pg.23
continuum, what sense can there be in talking of colors? None obviously…except we do it all the time.”

The beginning of Leonard Shalin’s book *Art and Physics* traces the formation of linear thinking to the creation of a linear alphabet: “the repeated use of the alphabets by a large number of ancient Greeks over a long period of time reinforced [the ideas] of abstraction, linearity, and continuity.” An alphabet can only exist in one direction, in one distinct order, and Greek art corresponded by beginning to exist “in a single plane [with] all the movement in one direction.” The use of the alphabet coincided with an understanding of linear time and history. Color, on the other hand, is represented in exactly the opposite way, with a circle. There are other ways to display color, such as color charts, but it can never logically exist linearly, and language always falls short in description. Color has the ability to exist beyond both language and time.

If language falls short, if logic cannot capture a full description of color, it seems impossible to avoid the word ‘intuition.’ To work intuitively is to create without evident rationale, or to base decisions on emotions, and not question what feels right. When I started photographing my work to create otherworldly landscapes, green never felt like the right color to include. I was looking at photographs of rocks, and even thinking back to my own photographs, and the influence of geology is everywhere in this series. To look at rocks is to have a window into the past—not human history, but an unimaginable length of time. It’s the kind of longevity Michael Heizer is trying to accomplish with *City*. Green, on the other hand, is the color of transient life; of spring that will come and go and be erased.

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82 David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000), pg.86
To make art about color is to embrace all of these irrationalities and contradictions. It is beyond language, beyond rationality. It means existing in a space of the alien, the non-human, and the other.

Figure 32: Wood Fired Basket

Figure 33: Cycles

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85 Jasmine Beul, Basket, 2016, wood fired ceramic, 10 x 15 x 8 in
86 Jasmine Beul, Cycles, 2017, ceramic, 30 x 24 x 20 in
CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

In the late 1970’s a group of American photographers led by Mark Klett set out to retrace the footsteps of the original geologic surveys of the West. They meticulously recreated the photos of Timothy O’Sullivan and William Henry Jackson. The resulting project became the Rephotographic Survey, and perhaps the most striking feature of many of these photographs is not how much had changed in 100 years, but how little evidence there was that any time had passed. Of course, there were cases where a road had been built, and a mining camp was gone, and even a valley flooded by the building of a dam, but overall, there were many cases where the photos looked almost identical. The Rephotographic Survey used the same black and white photography methods that would have been used in the 1870’s, but they also took photos at the same time of day with often identical exposures.

“Doubling: This then That” by Paul Berger was one of the essays published along with the complete collection of the Rephotographic Survey, and he took notice of the many similarities between the photos taken 100 years apart:

“Overall, there is no single before/after analysis that emerges as we look at this particular stereographic déjà vu. The complication is clearly one of scale, partly spatial, but mostly temporal. Spatially, we are most often presented with vast natural environments. Whenever human evidence of nineteenth century does invade the frame, it is most often consciously there for “scale,” in other words to be dwarfed by what surrounds it. Had the original survey photographers taken only close-ups of single objects, the chances would be greater that the rephotographs would be unambiguous in their updates.”87

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87 Paul Berger, “Doubling: This Then That,” Second View: The Rephotographic Survey, Mark Klett, Ellen
Berger also addresses the fact that these photographs are often more of an “artist impression” of the landscape—they are “repeatable, spatial scans, mechanically exact transpositions of three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional picture plane.” Usually photographs are accepted as unfiltered facts; maybe the closest thing to truth in art. The photographs behind these geologic surveys had a specific vision of the West. They captured its grandeur, its beauty, and its vastness. The photos are not lies, just very specific viewpoints. The Rephotographic survey helped reveal how the techniques used to make these photos had a lasting impact on America’s vision of the West.

I often thought of my own photographs in this series as fictional, even though they are photographs of real, physical objects. Like the survey photographs of Timothy O’Sullivan and William Henry Jackson it was important to view them from specific points in space, to make the sculptures appear like grand landscapes. Apart from the mirror photographs, every other piece was photographed from a low angle to emphasize their verticality, but it also meant that they were framed against the middle of the sky, where the blue is the most intense. In fact, it’s almost neon, and even though neon colors are usually unnatural, here it is in nature.

From the beginning I wanted these photos to be beautiful, even if I did not admit it, even to myself. To try and make beautiful work feels incredibly trivial. It also feels false. A behind the scenes photo also feels like it has more truth, even though it is the same medium as the finished piece. The idea that Timothy O’Sullivan, when part of a scientific exploration, would try to

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make beautiful and artistic images automatically makes them feel false. If they were ugly, it would make them feel more honest.

I have written about Donald Judd’s installations in Marfa, Texas, and how he firmly believed that his work needed to be in the right environment to be appreciated, but personally, I never thought much about Judd’s work until I saw his concrete boxes at Marfa, set against the sweeping desert landscape. All of a sudden, these boring boxes were beautiful. Reading Judd’s own arguments for why his work needed specific spaces to be successful often felt unbelievably pretentious, and for all the sources I quoted and have as references I did not include Judd’s own words. Still, I keep coming back to the images of these boxes, finding that they speak best for themselves.

In Undermining, Lucy Lippard notes that these landscape works of the West, from Spiral Jetty to Double Negative and all of the Marfa installations are often experienced in photograph form. They get reprinted in glossy books (some of which I used as references here), and even the contemporary artists working with Desert X will probably only be experienced by most people, including me, as photographs. Although it would be wonderful to make a pilgrimage to every one of these grandiose art projects it is not likely to happen. Artists like James Turrell, Charles Ross, and Michael Heizer will actually have to finish their works and make them open to the public before this could become possible. Until then, I, and many others, will enjoy these pieces the only way we can, through photographic documentation.

I started to feel stuck when it came to thinking about size, though, as the constant feedback I got about all of my pieces was: what if this was six feet tall? I was already exploring scale and the relativity of time. With photographs, I could make work which was more about an
experience than the physical objects. They feel like opposite mediums, the three-dimensional handmade object and the two-dimensional mechanical image, but here they exist together.

I have always been attracted to formalism in all types of media, books, films, art, etc. and art which tries to transcend the contemporary moment and try to be universal. The “nowhere spaces” that these photographs exist in became a metaphor for this kind of art—art which can embrace formalism, and maybe even beauty. This kind of art can sometimes be escapist, but I also believe the artists I have discussed, particularly a figure like James Turrell have made beautiful and contemplative art. Its success and acclaim reveal that there is still a need for this kind of art, even if it is difficult to put this into words. Perhaps it is strongest when left unsaid.

Let the art speak for itself.

Figure 34: *Sunset Strip II* \(^{89}\)

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\(^{89}\) Jasmine Beul, *Sunset Strip II*, 2020, Digital Photography
Figure 35: Dusted Landscape I

Jasmine Beul, Dusted Landscape I, 2020, Digital Photography
Figure 36: *Dusted Landscape II*[^91]

Figure 37: *Dusted Landscape III*[^92]

[^91]: Jasmine Beul, *Dusted Landscape II*, 2020, Digital Photography
[^92]: Jasmine Beul, *Dusted Landscape III*, 2020, Digital Photography
Figure 38: *Pink Triangles II*\(^{93}\)

Figure 39: *Blue Dots*\(^{94}\)

\(^{93}\) Jasmine Beul, *Pink Triangles II*, 2020, Digital Photography

\(^{94}\) Jasmine Beul, *Blue Dots*, 2021, Digital Photography
Figure 40: *Surreal Survey*[^5]

Figure 41: *Pink Towers II*[^6]

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32. Beul, Jasmine. *Basket*, 2016, wood fired ceramic, 10 x 15 x 8 in

33. Beul, Jasmine. *Cycles*, 2017, ceramic, 30 x 24 x 20 in


