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'Levitated Mass' revisits dramatic pull of LACMA's rock star

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The documentary "Levitated Mass" recounts the travels of the LACMA installation of the same name and discusses its significance with artist Michael Heizer. (Edwin Stevens / Los Angeles Times)

Let's start with the numbers, which are impressive: a 150 million-year-old granite boulder more than 21 feet high and weighing in at 340 tons. It took 11 days to transport that boulder, via a 206-wheeled trailer, the 105 miles from Riverside to the campus of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art — at a cost of \$10 million — to be put in place as part of a massive and controversial artwork. Oh, yeah. *That* boulder. The one they call "Levitated Mass."

If you lived in the Los Angeles area in the summer of 2012, it was hard to miss the hoopla surrounding the arrival of that work by Michael Heizer. Now a documentary, also called "Levitated Mass," takes you behind the scenes of that particular media sensation and does a considerable amount more as well.

Well-directed with exceptional access by veteran documentarian Doug Pray, whose previous films include "Hype!," "Scratch" and "Art & Copy," "Levitated Mass" in essence intercuts three stories, each of which is more unexpected than one might imagine.

The first story is an illustrated and illuminating art history lesson, in which we learn about Heizer's background as a 1960s pioneer in a branch of Conceptual art called Land art, which created monumental works outside the museum context.

"There were a number of artists," notes New York's Museum of Modern Art director Glenn Lowry, "who really felt that they had to move away from the commercial gallery, from urban

environments, and make art that had a different kind of connection to the landscape, and actually to the world."

"Levitated Mass" not only talks about Heizer's art, it also shows us numerous examples, including several pieces housed in New York's Dia:Beacon, the artist's massive City Project in Garden City, Nev., as well as the "This Equals That" installation that stood for 22 years in Lansing, Mich., before the city fathers had it taken down.

Seeing the context Heizer works in makes what he's doing with "Levitated Mass" easier to grasp. Pray has chosen to open his film with a Heizer quote on the screen hypothesizing that because "our age is simultaneously technological and primordial, the idea is art that reflects this."

The heart of Pray's film, both in terms of its central placement and minutes spent on it, is that amazing 11-day (or, to be more exact, 11-night) journey from Riverside's Pyrite Quarry to LACMA's Wilshire Boulevard location, a trip that required permission from 22 cities and four counties, each of which worried about issues such as the need to displace utility wires and the wear and tear on local roads in cash-strapped locales.

"Levitated Mass" is at its insider best conveying the astonishing complexity of that long, strange trip, ramrodded by an Oregon-based firm called Emmert International that specializes in massive moves but had never seen anything like this. If the art world had heroes (and for all I know, it does), the men who drove and steered this 294-foot-long trailer, and in many cases walked alongside it for the entire route, would be at the top of the list.

The most engaging, and unexpected, part of the boulder's journey was how the people who lived along the route came out at all hours of the night and early morning and turned the move into a de facto happening: the city of Long Beach even fashioned a street festival called Rockapalooza around it.

Especially interesting is the way these observers inevitably saw the rock through their own lens. The God-fearing were impressed when it parked for the night in front of the Rock of Salvation Church in Boyle Heights, while viewers in South L.A. were troubled that \$10 million was being spent to move a piece of art through a neighborhood where so many were out of work.

"Levitated Mass" third focus is its briefest but its most pointed and most instructive, and that is time spent with the reclusive artist himself as he oversees the rock's final LACMA installation, a personal appearance that is so delayed that one fears it's never going to happen.

Coming off as simultaneously passionate about his vision and frustrated about the inevitable time-consuming delays the scale of his work makes inevitable ("a decade is like a second to me," he grumbles) the gruff, brusque Heizer shows the signs of a lifetime spent in opposition. "There is not demand for something like this," he says, "the artist has to do it by himself." A film like this underscores why we are fortunate he has persevered.