

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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#### Obama designates Nevada area surrounding Heizer's 'City' a national monument

Deborah Vankin



*Land surrounding Michael Heizer's in-progress artwork "City" in central Nevada will be protected as part of a new national monument that President Obama is creating.  
(Tom Vinetz / Associated Press)*

The 704,000 acres of central Nevada surrounding artist Michael Heizer's longtime artwork-in-progress, "City," was declared a national monument in a White House ceremony, a move that will protect the majestic mountain-ringed desert as well as the massive sculpture.

President Obama's proclamation on Friday of the Basin and Range National Monument was the culmination of roughly 15 years of work by Los Angeles County Museum of Art director Michael Govan, alongside conservationists, to preserve the area around Heizer's mile-and-a-half-long creation.

"City," a collection of enormous ceremonial mounds and abstract forms made of earth, rock and concrete that evoke both ancient ruins and industrial technology, is nearing completion after more than 45 years of work.

Govan, LACMA co-chair Elaine Wynn, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and the reclusive Heizer himself all attended the ceremony. Govan has a longstanding

relationship with Heizer, who also created the “Levitated Mass” sculpture for the LACMA campus.

“City,” Govan said, “is one of the most ambitious and singularly important works, in my estimation, of [contemporary] art, particularly in the United States. What made this happen, now, was the coming together of the art interests — people who really felt this was an American art masterpiece that needs to be protected — and conservation interests who realized this is one of the great landscapes of the United States.”

The huge sculpture itself sits on privately owned land in the Garden Valley area of Basin and Range. The larger area is home to endangered and fragile wildlife, Native American trails and petroglyphs. Heizer’s sculpture site will be open to the public once the artwork is completed, but most of the surrounding area is government property under federal jurisdiction, vulnerable to potential fracking, oil and gas drilling, mining claims, road construction and vandalism.

While serving as director of New York’s Dia Art Foundation before he moved to LACMA, Govan helped raise funds through the nonprofit Triple Aught Foundation to acquire and protect all the private land that could be seen from Heizer’s “City” site — a swath of topography called the “viewshed” in conservation lingo — in order to protect the integrity of the visual landscape.

Since 2000, Govan has made many trips to Washington, he said, for lectures with congressional staffers to educate them about the potentially fragile artwork and its surrounding area.

When I got involved in the project, I quickly realized we were raising and spending money to finish his masterpiece and the land might not be protected,” Govan said.

The primary sources of funding for the Heizer work, he said, have come through Dia, LACMA and the Lannan Foundation; and the project has taken a significant chunk of Govan’s time.

Given his longtime involvement in the art project, helping to fund it through private gifts, Govan now sees LACMA as a sort of “godparent” to “City.”

The support of Reid has been crucial, Govan said.

He lobbied Reid’s staff, among other Washington leaders, for years. Reid finally visited “City” in 2007 and was so taken with the monumental work and its environs that he set about gaining Obama’s support.

“The sculpture is wonderful, it’s the icing on the cake on this beautiful park,” Reid said. “Michael Heizer worked on it for 48 years! It’s magnificent, but difficult to describe. When the president asked me to explain it, I said ‘I can’t!’ It’s huge, the size of the Mall here in Washington.”

In 2012, LACMA board member — now board co-chair — Elaine Wynn got involved. She’s lived in Las Vegas since 1969 and is a longtime friend of Reid’s. Wynn visited the “City” site, located about 150 miles north of Las Vegas, with Govan in 2012 and was also struck by Heizer’s in-progress artwork.

“I was taken by the otherworldliness of it,” Wynn said. “It springs out of this vast, flat valley that’s surrounded by our majestic mountains and it was such a pristine environment. To have something so timeless and also so modern and forward-thinking — I was completely caught off guard and enthralled by it.”

With Wynn’s help, Govan says he was able to make in-roads with business, political and education interests in Nevada, which helped move the effort forward.

With Obama and Reid both leaving office in 2017, it was important to set up protection for the Basin and Range area in a state where about 87% of the land is government owned, Reid said.

“This is part of my legacy, but it’s also Obama’s legacy,” he said. “It protects an extremely significant artwork and part of Nevada that’s untouched.”

Conservatives in Lincoln and Nye counties, where Basin and Range is located, have been critical of Friday’s designation. Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval issued a statement saying the Basin and Range monument designation “bypassed Congress on a public lands issue in which Nevada and our entire delegation should have had a primary role in working collectively to build consensus as we have done successfully in the past,” Sandoval said.

At Friday’s ceremony, Obama also signed proclamations designating the Waco Mammoth National Monument in central Texas and the Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument in Northern California.

After nearly half a century, Heizer’s sweeping artwork is 98% finished, Govan said. Final touches include water engineering and figuring out public access issues.

“It’s virtually finished,” Heizer said of his work. “I’m just a builder and I’m getting the job done as quickly as I can.”

About his trip to the White House, the artist added: “I’m still adjusting to it. I can’t really say I have a firm or fixed attitude yet — I’m still spinning a little bit. You

know, it's very important, the way the world is now, to have it [protected]; it's a good thing and very interesting, for sure."

"It's been a long haul," Govan added of the new Basin and Range National Monument. "There's this understanding that the power of this place is about both the artwork and its absolutely essential quality as an American landscape."