

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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### Michael Heizer: ‘I’m a quiet man. I just make art’

*The creator of the magisterial City is back in New York with a new exhibition. He tells Jason Fargo how he went about making his latest giant rock works*

Jason Fargo



*Children take in the view from beneath a giant rock on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in Los Angeles. Photograph: FREDERIC J. BROWN/AFP/Getty Images*

To meet Michael Heizer, the sculptor and pioneer of Land Art, usually entails an arduous trek through the desert. I only have to take the subway. Heizer has been creating large-scale artworks in Garden Valley, Nevada out of stone and earth – and one in particular, the magisterial City, has occupied him for decades. Yet this May, for the first time in 25 years, Heizer has come back to New York: the city he left in the late 1960s when his work outgrew lofts and galleries, and his ambition grew with it.

Heizer, 70, is presenting a new exhibition at Gagosian that features two massive boulders suspended in steel frames and a suite of “altars”: room-filling, inclined steel sculptures in the shapes of wishbones, barbells, boomerangs. The altars feel slightly underwhelming at first if you expect the mass and size of Heizer’s outdoor sculptures. But as you begin to pass through the gallery, their inscrutable, see-sawing forms begin to take on hieratic significance. As for the rocks, the largest of which weighs 18 tons (more than 16,000kg), they hover in custom boxes as if they were light as air.

I ask him whether the post-Bloomberg metropolis surprises him; not as exciting as the cheap, vibrant city you left, surely? He puts me right.

“This town went from an industrial hard-ass bunch of office buildings to a place you can live in. And the High Line! You get underneath that plate and there are 80bn rivets – that’s how the Titanic was built! It’s a great thing for the history of the city. Americans are growing reflective for the first time, not pioneering. There’s a sense of history now, I think.”

Single-minded, and not keen on small talk, Heizer has given very few interviews over the course of his five-decade career. He blanches when I pull out my tape recorder; no recording allowed, he tells me. He is not keen to discuss his inspirations as an artist; not keen, either, to describe his own work. So we start talking about the process of making the awesomely heavy, technically daunting new rock works – and soon he opens up, speaking of his crew and his Nevada community with a warmth that belies his reputation.

“You need a guy in the mining business,” Heizer tells me, if you want to turn an 18-ton rock into a work of art. “So whenever I need a hole drilled, I call a guy I know with an Air Track. The crew that I have that helped build this show – it was a year and a half effort – are normally assigned to concrete and dirt work. But in the winter, fortunately for everybody, we have a lot of downtime. It can go 45, 50 below zero. Up in the Great Basin people are just laid off in the winter. But I try to get things cooking. These are young guys that I can rely on. And I need them and they need me.”

Heizer’s art, as much as his life, can’t be separated from the rural Nevada landscape where he has made his home for nearly half a century. After a childhood in Berkeley and an early career in New York, he went back west in the late 1960s, where he began making artworks at an unprecedented scale. Like other artists of his generation – James Turrell, Alice Aycock, Robert Smithson, Walter de Maria – Heizer spurned the gallery for the landscape, and started undertaking monumental projects directly in the earth.

The most important of those early examples of Land Art was Double Negative (1969–70), which consists of two deep cuts into the sides of a Nevada mesa. Each of them runs 1500ft long (450 meters), and though you can perceive them from the air – or, these days, from Google Earth – at ground level they can only be experienced, rather than beheld. The work is still there, although it’s begun to erode.

“Years ago, when I had no money and I made a work of art, maybe I couldn’t afford to make it more resistant to the weather. I did, however, exploit that situation. I wasn’t an environmental, greenie artist making things out of moss and leaves. But I knew that some things dissipate, and I factored that into the work.”

Ultimately, he wanted to create art in the land that would not deteriorate, but endure for generations to come. In 1972, he embarked on the creation of City, an almost unfathomably ambitious suite of abstract sculptures in the Nevada desert. Where Double Negative removed mass from the earth, City reshapes the earth: walls, mounds, and giant geometric forms, all in conversation with the near-infinite landscape. City has cost millions of dollars to produce, and financial and political considerations – the land surrounding City has been threatened by oil exploration and a possible nuclear waste rail line – have delayed its completion over and over.

It is not an overstatement to call City the most elaborate undertaking ever by an American artist. Now, it may finally be coming to completion. “It’s basically 98% finished. The important stuff either is done or is being done this summer,” Heizer confirms. “There’s fence work and gates

that have to be put in. I have an obligation to people not to turn this into a carnival. I'm an artist; I want to finish this before anyone shows up. Nobody's giving me trouble." He has been helped immeasurably, he says, by Michael Govan, the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art – "a true partner", in Heizer's phrase, who has shepherded City through years of logistical and financial obstacles. The Nevada senator Harry Reid has been petitioning the Obama administration to declare the area around City a national monument, though no one is celebrating yet.

If and when City opens to the public, though, Heizer has no intention to transform the site into another way-station on the global jet-set art circuit. "I've been living there right on 50 years and I have an obligation to the people who live there not to bring in a lot of nutcases who are going to kill their livestock. That's what these fucking humans will do. The landscape is part of the aesthetic. Even though the landscape isn't a shape or a color, it's an integral component."

And even with the dawning completion of City, his life's work, Heizer is not looking for public hosannas or massive attention.

"I never even considered people anyway. You make art for people to look at, of course, so maybe you presume people are going to go there one day. But not a lot of them – it ain't gonna happen. Millions of people go to the movies and they're so proud, but none of those things relate to this. It may from the outside look like a spectacle in the making, but it isn't. I'm a quiet man. I just make art."

*Michael Heizer: Altars, Gagosian, 555 W 24 St, to 2 July*

- This piece was amended on 19 May 2014; there are not three but two boulders on show and a smaller work, Blue Diorite.