

## GAGOSIAN



### Complicating the Canon of American Land Artists

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*Michael Heizer, Fragment A, 2016, granitic rock and weathering steel 113 1/4 x 172 1/2 x 83 1/2 inches, 287.7 x 438.2 x 212.1 cm.*

“The tools of art have too long been confined to ‘the studio.’ The city gives the illusion that earth does not exist.” – Robert Smithson, “The Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,”

1968

The city is very much in evidence in Beverly Hills, California. Between the boutiques and high-end department stores, the endless traffic of idling cars circling the blocks, the pristine bank buildings, and the manicured palm trees, one would be hard pressed to find a patch of untouched earth here.

The polished environment around Gagosian Beverly Hills, which is currently showing works by American artist and Land Art pioneer Michael Heizer, is a far cry from the expanse of Nevada desert that hosts Heizer’s masterwork-in-progress, *City*. Heizer’s is a very different kind of city: devoid of people, products, or plants. It’s a mile-long, monumental complex, modeled on prehistoric sites, and preemptively placed in the middle of nowhere, like the unearthed ruin of an ancient civilization. Heizer’s *City*, in contrast, gives the illusion that nothing *but* earth exists.

Heizer began work on *City* in 1972, and, as detailed in this revealing profile on the artist in *The New Yorker*, it is finally near completion. When it opens to the public, probably around 2020, *City* will join the ranks of earthworks-as-pilgrimage-sites in the American Southwest: among them, Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970), in Utah; Walter De Maria’s *The Lightning Field* (1977), in New Mexico; Nancy Holt’s *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76), in Utah; Heizer’s

own *Double Negative* (1969-70), in Nevada; and—when it, too, is finally finished—James Turrell's *Roden Crater* (1972-present) in Arizona. Rightly, these larger-than-life works will be considered the defining masterpieces of each respective artist, but, because of their extreme isolation, this means only a small audience will have the opportunity to experience them.

Land Art, or earthworks, was born of the political unrest of the late 1960s, an art movement that rejected the art institution, the art object, the city, even civilization itself. At least that's how the story goes. But Land Artists have shown works in galleries and other indoor spaces since the beginning—starting with Dwan Gallery, the *Earth Art* show at Cornell University in 1969, and through to mega-gallery Gagosian.

It might surprise some people that Michael Heizer makes paintings, since he is known primarily for digging holes in the ground and placing enormous rocks upon precipices, but painting has been a vital part of his practice throughout his career. In the 1960s he painted directly on the desert floor, but also created discrete objects. Gagosian currently has on display a group of new *Hard-Edge Paintings*—a series he began in the 1960s—as well as an entirely new series from 2015, entitled *Wet Paintings*, evocatively described in *The New Yorker* as “twenty bucks’ worth of paint from Ace Hardware transformed into a cosmic offering.” Each canvas in the exhibition features irregular angles and explorations of negative and positive space, with bright and viscous color in the *Wet* and monochromatic tensions in the *Hard-Edge*. Anchoring the show are two “negative wall sculptures”: massive boulders of granite set into the wall within a ground and frame of weathered steel.

Walter De Maria, best known for his electricity-conducting grid of 400 steel rods in the Arizona high desert, also made sculptures, drawings, films, and music. Throughout his oeuvre, the artist explored the resonances of geometry with line, space, and distance. And while very few people have the opportunity to experience *The Lightning Field* in person (the Dia Art Foundation administers the site, allowing up to six guests to view the work each day, from May through October each year), De Maria's indoor works offer viewers similar meditations on repetition, space, and geometry. A little known Land Art secret of New York City is its *Earth Room*, created by De Maria the same year as *The Lightning Field*, and located at 141 Wooster. It is open from 12-6pm, Wednesdays through Sundays, with free entry. *The New York Earth Room* contains 250 cubic yards of dirt—lovingly tended by the Dia Art Foundation (the work must be watered regularly)—laid out in an even expanse, 22 inches deep, across the entire 3,600-square-foot, second-story space.

More common for De Maria's indoor works, however, are his installations composed of precise configurations of rods made of steel or plaster. One of these works—*Large Rod Series: Circle/Rectangle, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13* (1986)—is currently on view at the Dallas Museum of Art, in a very special arrangement, together with a painting by El Greco, and a rare recording of a musical composition by De Maria, entitled *Cricket Music*, from 1964. In this powerful composition, one finds a kind of shared spiritual meditative focus: on the figure of Christ in the El Greco painting of *St. Francis Kneeling in Meditation*, and on the emptiness/oneness in the center of De Maria's sculpture, indicated at by the rods and their imagined intersection.

One thing that is not especially well understood, however, is the scope and depth of Land Art, beyond the canonized practitioners. One would be forgiven for assuming that Land Art was only to be found in the American Southwest, by this small group of New York-based artists. The Brooklyn Museum complicates this history with their current exhibition of works by Beverly

Buchanan. An interdisciplinary artist working in the American South, whose works deal primarily with Black vernacular architecture, Buchanan created a series of earthworks in the Macon, Georgia area between 1977 and 1985, the extant examples of which are illustrated in the Brooklyn Museum exhibition in a video installation. Rather than reflecting the expansiveness of the desert, Buchanan's earthworks sink into marsh vegetation. Rather than awe with scale, size, and distance, Buchanan's works recede into ruin, the concrete structures now almost indistinguishable from the small markers of graveyards and the foundations of slave quarters that can be found nearby.

Likewise, Buchanan's small sculptures and drawings on display in the Brooklyn Museum celebrate the ramshackle, the entropic disrepair of stones left to weather, of wooden shacks to warp and curl. In a way, her slab sculptures made of cast concrete find a middle ground between the rawness of Heizer's unhewn granite boulders and the ordered geometry of De Maria's arranged rods—and in so doing, evoke the handmade, improvised, lived experience. And as art historian Andy Campbell points out, Buchanan's earthworks engaged with the specific, black, Southern history of the sites where they were installed, rather than using the vast desert as a blank canvas onto which the (white) artist could impose his vision.

In comparing these three artists' works, however, the assumed Land Art renunciation of the city—its luxuries, its markets, and its monies—begins to look rather thin and gauzy. Heizer, De Maria, Smithson, and others took their art out into the isolation of the Southwest desert, and Buchanan took hers out to the forgotten Southern swamps. Yet while the city was closely watching her Land Art and Postminimalist peers, Buchanan, on the other hand—as a black, Southern, woman artist—worked in relative obscurity. (Buchanan died in 2015, at the age of 75.) Expanding the canon of Land Art by adding voices like Buchanan's only enriches it, and shows that, like her more well known peers, her works “explore the pre- and post-historic mind,” as Smithson put it, “[It] must go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts.”

Michael Heizer, *New Paintings and Sculpture*, at Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills, is on view from November 5 to December 21, 2016.

*Walter De Maria: Counterpoint* is on view at the Dallas Museum of Art from October 19, 2016 to January 22, 2017.

*Beverly Buchanan—Ruins and Rituals* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, is on view from October 21, 2016 to March 5, 2017.