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15 March 2012

Site-specificity in art gets eye of Fieldwork Marfa residents

Mark Glover

Fieldwork Marfa, an international program for emerging artists, critics and researchers will show a series of short films at the Crowley Theatre at 6pm tonight.

The event, an extension of Wednesday's Fieldwork Marfa Symposium, is a collaboration of ESBA, Nantes, HEAD-Genève, and Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam. The institutions provide education at the master's level in art, art criticism, and art research, and students in the three-month residency create compilations inspired by the Marfa landscape.

"The infinity of space here is special," said Jean-Pierre Graff, Director at HEAD – Genève sitting at the small table in the patio at Fieldwork Marfa's bureau. "Especially for the young artist, leaving school, full of information, too much perhaps, and then suddenly, with a kind of violence, they must lose themselves and focus on the empty white page."

There is bustle this morning before the show. Sun, cigarettes, and coffee flow in the courtyard. Students arrive from Nantes and Amsterdam while others wheel just-packed bags, outbound for London and Copenhagen. Hugs, good-bye, hello, postcards on the table.

Yann Chateigne holds a 4×6 card of a Marfa landscape modified by Fieldwork Marfa and punctuated with white rectangular slits. "They are like geometrical holes in the landscape. Mystery holes in which the artist must investigate," he said, as his red hair glowed in the sun.

Etienne Bernard, who studied man-altered landscapes, minimalism and photography, sits at the table in sunglasses. "Most of the students here have a desire to work with the American landscape and minimalism," he said. " Marfa is a Mecca for this type of work, thanks to Donald Judd. Not too many people have changed the face of a small town like he has."

Bernard talks about what happens when you make art public, a theme of this year's research.

"Is Prada Maffa a good thing? I'm not sure. That's what we're studying. This is a tough question," said Graff. "It's not very comfortable to ask about it with everybody."

"Art outside of a museum or gallery is a very different thing," said Bernard.

A new resident walks by, crunching the small rocks under his feet. He's in a T-shirt and smiling.

“Investigating the landscape, documenting traces of activity, the people, the border, – the idea of land-art: site, perspective integrating with a social place, very concrete things. Marfa is one of the few places on the planet where all that connects,” said Chateigne.

“One of the few places that has infinite space and world renowned foundations in the middle of it,” said Bernard. “And the shock of two dimensions: the landscape without limit and the Border Patrol, the iconic wondering roads, the essence of American freedom, and the barbed wire two meters away, open skies and the… comment tu dis?” He asks in his weighted French accent. “What do you call this thing… the blimp, the drug blimp?”

“Yes, the tension of control and infinity,” Graff said. “It’s very stimulating to be here.”

Marfa resident and Fieldwork Marfa Coordinator Valerie Culbertson joins us at the table. “When I came here from France 10 years ago, the impression of the landscape was so immense, the big sky, it’s a very foreign feeling coming from Europe. You really must experience it,” she said.

“There is magnetism to this place,” Chateigne said. “A supernatural dimension of Marfa, mystery lights, deserts in mystical paintings, fascinating. ”

“If aliens come, they will come here,” said Graff.

Mark Glover, ‘Site-specificity in art gets eye of Fieldwork Marga residents‘, *The Big Bend Sentinel*, Vol. 78 No. 48, March 15, 2012: p. 6

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