

Panhandle Odyssey, Part II

by Titus O'Brien
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Lubbock

I rolled into town around dinner time. Texas Tech's Joe Arredondo met me at Café J, which he deemed "the only decent restaurant in town." Due to his persistent requests at Café J for Hendrick's gin, the bar began carrying it and it's since become a local favorite - no doubt making some distant importer curious why sales in west Texas have suddenly spiked. The food was so-so; however, an apple tart dessert, whipped up unexpectedly by a new pastry chef, was actually what I dream of every time I order apple pie (possibly my favorite food). They also poured one mean cocktail, the patio had a dry cool breeze, and a couple of gin and tonics later I was feeling no pain. Add me to the Hendrick's converts. I didn't even think I liked gin...

Arredondo is Tech's director of exhibitions (doing a fine job of pulling together shows on modest budgetary means), as well as the general connector for everyone art-related in Lubbock. He and I met again the next morning to drive out to architect Robert Bruno's steel house outside town. Bruno is an enigmatic European émigré who has taught architecture at Texas Tech and has spent the last 30 years constructing a home out of puzzle-piece COR-TEN steel plates. It looks like a rusty Lee Bontecou-designed Transformer, ready to march off across the valley in a hail of laser beams.

He began by building a stone and shattered-tile mosaic house just across the street, in a neighborhood of American flag-waving spilt levels. While lyrically freakish and surprising for its locale, it also seems dated and a little too hippie-Hundertwasser for my taste. The steel house, on the other hand, is a landmark piece of design and engineering, and I think one of the most exciting and visionary homes ever constructed in the US. While it conjures memories of other trippy tripod sci-fi hillside homes built across the American west in the 60s and 70s, Bruno's building is so formally thoughtful that it transcends its own clichés. Simply as sculpture, it gives Richard Serra a run for his money.

Arredondo left me with a list of a dozen local artists that I could look up. I had already tracked down the well-known Wheeler brothers, but they were both heading for the Rockies to see family, and cool down from blistering Texas temperatures. Surprisingly, everyone I called on Joe's list was around, and driving the length and breadth of Lubbock, I dropped unsuspected in on all sorts of folks.

First, though, was the Underwood Center for the Arts. I initially had trouble finding it, but then I spotted a nondescript building built of prefab industrial materials with lots of gratuitous oblique angles, and thought, "Eureka! Art!" The stereotypes didn't end at the catywampus entrance. The main gallery space is yet another high ceilinged, atrium-like affair, red-walled, unforgiving and pointless. The featured show was a retrospective of Lubbock artists spanning decades, and while I honor and respect the community building effort, let's just say that there was evidence aplenty why Lubbock has failed to get on anyone's art radar to date. A survey at Texas Tech's Landmark Arts Gallery, celebrating 40 years of their art program, was similarly chaotic, with many of the same artists.

I then met Ryder Richards and Jonathan Whitfill, who were doing some framing at Charles Adams Gallery. I saw more examples there of work by some of the better artists in the Underwood show, like Lahib Jaddo, and more or less everyone else I'd eventually meet that day. We headed next door for coffee with Piotr Chizinski, who is the third member of Ryder Jon Piotrs Nomadic Gallery. You may have seen them in Marfa, Houston, San Angelo, or Wichita Falls, in matching jumpsuits, manning installations of art hung in the backs of rented Ryder trucks (the name is somewhat auspiciously coincidental). The idea is a natural one for three young artists in Lubbock. Rather than wait to be discovered in some random exhibition at the local art center, they just keep hitting the road, taking their art to the people. This could end up looking like nothing more than a rehashed retro Fluxus/"Furthur" bus trip love-in, but the guys take the lighting, placement and presentation seriously. They may be having a good time, but they want it to look pro. It's a great idea. I found them energetic, smart and funny, and imagine they comprise a good percentage of whatever cool-quotient is measurable in town.

I next met with David Lindsay, who was about to head off to Romania for a short residency. He shows sometimes with Valley House in Dallas. Like most of the other folks I met, he teaches at Tech. He seems like one of those artists doing a good job of getting lots of applications out there and capitalizing on opportunities outside of the commercial gallery racket. His photo-realistic paintings on shaped canvases can seem a bit gimmicky and awkward, but at least he can actually paint, and he's trying stuff out. And certain pieces, like a long narrow spiraling landscape I saw in pictures, look very promising.

Ceramic artist Wesley Harvey was packing for a move to San Antonio, after recently finishing a degree at Texas Tech and garnering a favorable mention in Art in America. He seemed psyched to be getting out. His camp-y, kitsch-y, glazed and flocked porcelain figurine conglomerations are witty and well made. It's a distinctive, signature style, one that if he keeps pushing, could become a significant contribution to art in the state.

Next I dropped by Carol and Upe Flueckiger's home and studios. She is an artist; he is an architect. They met ten years

ago when they both arrived to teach. They co-designed their home, which has been featured on the cover of Texas Architecture and in The New York Times (which in an act of possible sexist snobbery focused solely on Upe, failing to give Carol her due). The home makes a surprising, sustainable postmodern appearance in the old neighborhood that traditionally was home to the Tech faculty (and where my grandpa built a house in the 1950's when he taught there.) Xeriscaped and oriented to deal with the west Texas elements, it's open, spacious and totally livable. Perhaps it will help pave the way for a countermovement to the tract home cancer surrounding Lubbock.

Last stop was back to the Tech campus proper to visit graphic artist Dirk Fowler, renowned worldwide for his concert poster designs. He's worked for the likes of Wilco, Built to Spill, Johnny Cash, Loretta Lynn, the New York Dolls, etc. A panhandle native, Fowler is perhaps the most famous guy no one in Lubbock has ever heard of. He related a funny story about being recognized by a young skater kid in town, who was rendered almost speechless by the encounter. He prints his posters by hand, and they normally don't number more than 80, so they tend not to have a long street life, as they get snatched up more or less instantly by collectors. And you can see why -- they are generally brilliant. He developed his own print technique of cutting rubber instead of lino, and that subtly adds to the signature quality of his designs, which are unusually spacious, sensitive and thoughtful for the genre. Much like the man himself, who I found modest, funny and happy to still be living quietly in the panhandle, raising a family, and when I dropped in, working hard to get a poster off in time for a Raconteurs gig in Italy.

Canyon

I got to the hotel a bit early and thought I'd go find a place to have a beer. No such luck. I don't know if the whole county is dry, but I couldn't find an open restaurant, bar, café, diner, liquor store, nothing. Intent on spending more of Glasstire's money, I settled for a Mounds bar at the Cash 'n Carry and went to bed.

The next morning I got up before dawn for the 20 minute drive to Palo Duro Canyon. The second biggest canyon in the US, it doesn't really compare to the Grand, happily making it less overrun with the tourist scourge. I spotted all kinds of wildlife in the two hours I spent there, including: a bobcat, a pair of wild turkeys, a herd of pronghorns, two ground owls, red-tailed hawks, white-tailed deer, a road runner, a weasel, a fox, rabbits galore, unknown lizards and a bull snake, with nary a fly or mosquito. Lovely all 'round.

I drove back to Canyon and the ostensible inspiration for the entire trip, the Colt show at the Panhandle-Plains Museum. It's a handsome, concise overview, with no more than a few dozen guns in a series of dark wood vitrines. I learned that Colt came up with his revolutionary idea of a revolving cartridge cylinder staring at the steering wheel while working as a ship's mate at the ripe old age of 16. He whittled his idea in wood in order to demonstrate how it would work. This original carving is shown, near one of the most elaborate bejeweled six-shooters Colt would later ever produce.

A revolving cylinder was a radical advance in firearm engineering of the era, and paved the way for a whole world of hurt

for those on the receiving end of its revolution. Think musket vs. revolver; or more distressingly, bow and arrow vs. revolver. It was truly "the gun that won the west", if winning meant the white guys taking from the brown ones. It also made Sam Colt insanely wealthy, and included in the exhibit are giant aristocratic portraits of him and his wife, and even a Roman-esque marble portrait bust. A series of George Catlin self portraits of him using Colts to impress natives and fend off wild beasts are fascinating and not a little hilariously self-aggrandizing. They're actually an early form of American pop art, having been commissioned by Colt himself.

The firearms on display include Colt's own, but also copies, knock-offs, failed attempts and most sculpturally compelling, two nests of pistols that melted together in a factory fire. I grew up with guns, and I guess I know how to appreciate their functional and aesthetic beauty. But I always find it an eerie and terrible one.

The rest of the museum has some little gems, especially of art from the heyday of the Taos scene, including the obligatory enshrined O'Keefe.

Amarillo

I managed to set up a meeting with Stanley Marsh 3 and his assistant, a guy going by some serial-killer sounding moniker that I didn't quite catch, who was going to take me to Robert Smithson's Amarillo Ramp . I knew generally of Marsh by his association with Cadillac Ranch and the Ant Farm guys, Smithson and more vaguely as an art collector and all-around Texan eccentric. He certainly lived up to the rep.

Marsh's offices occupy an entire floor in Amarillo's lone skyscraper, the 30-story Chase bank tower. The elevator opens up to a beat-up children's romper room full of giant, dirty, brightly colored vinyl shapes, and some bad Gorky and Pollock copies. I wandered into a neighboring room, known as "The Office." Three wasted-looking twenty-something art dudes were sprawled out amidst a scene of total destruction, filth and trashed/trash art, watching (what else?) "A Clockwork Orange." It looked like every stoner art school apartment I ever saw, or in a couple cases, lived in.

I was greeted by a slow-to-rise, elf-like scrawny blond wastrel who had the distinct features of a guy who needs to eat more food and less drugs. LBK, as he's known, later admitted to having been on a bit of bender the night before ("a bit of crack and dirty speed" was the descrip of his prescrip), but though sleepless, for the next few hours he cheerfully, if a bit self-obsessively, acted as my tour guide of Marshville. I only wished he'd stop inserting himself into every picture I was trying to take.

LBK, it turns out, is an acronym for Long Board Kid, his street tag. He first took me back to see Marsh, who was sprawled on a couch in his slippers watching internet stock figures scroll on a huge projected screen. He rose, and shaking my hand, asked "How old are you?" Not sure I heard him correctly, I asked him to repeat the question. A weird way to greet someone, I thought. The query took on greater poignancy later as I heard and read about the lawsuits regarding his alleged sexual predation of minors.

"I'm 70" he said, and launched into a long, well-practiced monologue about his semi-reluctant involvement with the art world, and the absurdity of taking any of it in any way seriously. Despite a couple questions about my own work, and accusations that as an adjunct professor at UT I am a useless tick feeding on the life blood of our great state, I felt like nothing more than a foil for his routine. I didn't mind. It was entertaining.

Marsh is breezily dismissive of artists, the art world and academia as a whole; all easy targets, no doubt. But despite his ranting that he knew all the Ab Ex and minimalist guys, and anyone at all can do what they did, the giant bloodless Franz Kline copy on the wall behind him belied his own argument. The Arshile Gorky in the lobby is plainly a copy of his most famous work, *The Liver is the Cock's Comb*, owned by the Albright-Knox Museum. It's one of my favorite paintings in the world, but Marsh's "version" is like hearing the Goldberg Variations played by an eight-year-old Suzuki-method student. It's cute enough, but wincingly clunky. Insult to injury, it's upside-down.

I was disturbed by the lack of care being given to other "real" works in side rooms and hallways, and later at his house -- an early Larry Poons for instance, or an even earlier rare John Chamberlain painting. A convincing Gottlieb and a Motherwell, presumably real, were leaned casually against walls, side by side amidst the fakes. LBK pulled an actually interesting, real-life Lichtenstein painting out of the rubble in the Office to show me how he was cutting up Xeroxes of it. Lord knows what else was scattered amidst the debris. I didn't just feel bad for the art. The people occupying other offices around the floor, obviously busy actually doing the work to keep Marsh solvent, weren't exactly smiling and waving. What must they think about the rotating cast of drug-addled teens and homeless guys floating through? A pervasive and depressing sense of decadence and decay would permeate the day, reaching an apex later at Smithsonian's Ramp.

We left the Chase building and walked across the street to LBK's studio, a graffiti covered, disused old auto shop devoid of much production. I listened to the ongoing ballad of LBK throughout the day: how he was essentially a runaway street punk drawn into Marsh's orbit, who with a group of similarly self-mythologizing kids, generally raise hell in Amarillo, periodically finding themselves in jail only to be bailed out by Marsh. Marsh keeps LBK on salary, and having him act as caretaker and general PR person seems like a decision in keeping with a somewhat questionable MO.

I genuinely liked LBK, and even think he has some talent. He's just not the guy I would pick to serve as the public face for my world-class art collection. But then, the choice does speak volumes. The guy struck me as someone in need of some real guidance (and probably rehab) for whom Marsh could prove the most inauspicious of mentors. The actual end point of Marsh's right-wing laissez-faire non-aesthetic philosophy is really a kind of nihilistic malaise, and I can't blame the kid for overestimating himself and undervaluing the elements of his environs. Mix Marsh's studied mon/anarchic influence and punk, and you get the boys working for him out torching the Cadillac Ranch on a drunken nighttime joy ride, and painting rocks across Smithsonian's worn down ramp neon lime green in a misguided attempt at updating it. I like

the raw energy, but it seems generally errant and loveless.

LBK took me out to Toad Hall, Marsh's family homestead on the outskirts of town. I received a tour of the grounds and had some of Wendy Marsh's quite delicious blueberry/peach cobbler. There were peacocks cawing, miniature ponies prancing, a Zonkey (Donbra? A zebra/donkey cross) fleeing myriad dogs and a llama named Tony. There was a big classic Chamberlain rusting in the yard and a street sign graveyard. Marsh's infamous street signs are actually one of his best ideas, and many of them really work. He and various people in his circle come up with the ideas for them, he pays for their manufacture, and they get put up around town by request, staying up until stolen or until their removal is demanded. Joe Arredondo has a refugee in his yard down in Lubbock.

We drove out to the Floating Mesa, which in keeping with the general vibe, from a dozen miles away was visibly rusting. Then we drove out to the Ramp. It's remote, a dozen miles or more out deep into ranch land on dirt roads. It was real Texas out there, and you can see what must have been the allure for Smithson. I was interested to hear the story behind its creation, and how the site had been converted from an old watering hole. The ramp itself sits down in a small basin, and you come upon it from above. There had been recent rains, and the scrub was vivid green against the red soil. The sky was overcast, making everything appear both closer and more sharply delineated.

It was frankly sort of sad, and surprisingly small. Once over 20 feet tall at its high point, it seemed no more than ten now, a worn down, weed covered, neglected berm of dirt you'd just mistake for an old watering trough dam. A phantom. In itself that's ok. Smithson was all about entropy. And he of course never saw the thing constructed anyway, having famously lost his life surveying the land by air and crashing a few hundred feet from the site. Marsh claims Smithson's wife Nancy Holt finished it with help from Richard Serra, though others dispute Serra's involvement. You can almost envision what Smithson was after; descending the slope to the ramp, watching it rise against the flat background and distant mesas, ascending its slow spiraling rise...almost.

Whatever the experience might once have been, now you just think, in a few more years this thing will be gone. It's almost to the stage where it looks like one good prairie thunderstorm could wash it away forever. The real kicker is that LBK has painted dozens of stones on and around it, large and small, a shocking fluorescent green. He rambled about painting fire hydrants in town the same green, and weaving some mythic yarn about him finding the last Smithson diary and channeling Smithson's ghost or something, and with the influence of drugs and advent of the Age of Narcissism he feels he has every right to "engage" Smithson's final work in dialogue as peer. Or to just deface it -- you be the judge. Hey, Stanley Marsh 3 doesn't care; why should you? All those artists and nosy curators from Dia are just full of shit anyway, right? I wonder what all the other pilgrimistas think about this tour. I assume mine wasn't all that exceptional. LBK said folks come fairly often, and he enjoys messing with them.

Marsh said to me that it was only because Judd got mad at him about something or other that the Marfa thing didn't happen on his land. Which actually pointed out an effective contrast. I actually respect that Chinati has decided to stop

that weekend fiasco/fandango in October. It had gotten out of hand, certainly out of keeping with Judd's spirit and intent. It points to what is possible when an artist's wishes are respected and a legacy is maintained. Do art objects deserve the kind of reverence some imbue them with, and the religious fervor our culture has come to accord the systems around them? Most of the time, probably not. Do they deserve, on the other hand, to be kept up somewhat selflessly, in order to hand down their legacy to everyone else born further and further out from their genesis? The answer is, of course, a resounding yes. But Marsh feels no obligation to anyone. A rich insider dilettante born into money, he can dismiss low-paid teachers as parasites and art professionals as conmen, and shove artworks by America's most famous artists into leaky-roofed sheds to be forgotten. That's all his business, I guess. All I'm saying is, it all just felt kinda arrogant, lazy and disrespectful.

I actually genuinely liked the old coot, a charming septuagenarian raconteur who's accomplished some wiley, worthy acts of cultural subterfuge. Even with the accusations of forced skinny dipping, sexually-charged teen hazings, and mutual masturbation, he seems generally harmless and doddering. If he just wants to paint badly like other people, do faux-Indian snow dances on TV and let it all rot, so be it. If I'd spent 70 years riding daddy's gravy train, I might do the same. I truly was sincerely grateful for the unpaid tour, the hospitality, and the cobbler. But the aftertaste (of the day, not the cobbler) was just a bit sour.

Epilogue

The towns along US 287 back toward Dallas seemed apocalyptically bleak. I needed dinner, but wouldn't stop at any of the broke down dives I pulled up to for fear of getting food poisoning, or worse, my head cracked open by some teeth-grinding, wild-eyed country meth hopper wanting to shake me down for loose change. I kept thinking, "What's happened to rural Texas?" These lands where my grandparents and great-grandparents raised cotton, corn, chickens and big families, going to dances and county fairs and falling in love and maybe even dreaming of sending a kid to college someday? Back when the town 50 miles away was far enough to escape your troubles, maybe even make your fortune, and downtown Cisco was jumping on a Saturday night? I often feel like the Coen Brothers got it right in "No Country for Old Men."

There's talk of doubling Texas Tech's enrollment, to rival UT's and A&M's. Lubbock seems like an alright place to make a home base and some work. It's alive and growing. Mac Davis might be less excited to just see it in his rearview mirror -- hell, he even has a street named after him now, running by an art center. Abilene isn't so far from a number of larger cities, and you can still get that authentic small town experience without the corner methamphetamine chef. They have numbers of galleries and friendly entrenched artists. There're reasons for hope. Hell, I even found some great Thai food in Childress.

Marsh's shadow looms large over art in Amarillo, and I personally didn't find his influence the most wholesome or inspired. But there are probably other Amarillos, other Lubbocks, other Abilenes and Canyons that I didn't have access to on this short trip. Feel free to share your own, and offer to give another GT writer access to your window on the west Texas world. I give no final word or assessment, except to say that I was grateful to the Panhandlers who opened their doors to me, keeping alive the state's rep for down home hospitality and demonstrating a convincing native resourcefulness.

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