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# MARFA ON MY MIND

## by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

Donald Judd slept a lot. After spending a weekend at Chinati, the art museum that he established in Marfa, Texas, I can understand why. To view the sundry installations by Dan Flavin, John Chamberlain or, most important, Judd himself, requires a two-mile walk around the complex of buildings once known as Fort D.A. Russell. The 340 acres of land extends to a barely visible horizon of low-slung mountains, an unbroken vista but for Judd's massive concrete containers, standing sentinel. So much space is enervating. It defies the very concept of an agenda. When asked the date, a local Marfian answers, "Does it really matter?" In Marfa, it doesn't seem to matter -- which is a congenial condition for a nap and explains the beds that Judd kept in his studios.

Equally, ambition is tiring and Judd was nothing if not ambitious, accomplishing an enormous amount before dying of cancer in 1994 at age 64. Beyond the sheer, staggering beauty of his 100 milled aluminum boxes located in two restored artillery sheds, surfaces glimmering in the magical Marfa light, it is the magnitude of his ambition that is obvious. In our age of knickknack esthetics and historical amnesia, Judd's commitment to creating an enduring art, removing a portion of it from the hubbub of commerce and securing the circumstances of its presentation for the foreseeable future is, well, impressive. Judd, who studied philosophy and art history at Columbia, embraced ambition as surely as such artistic predecessors as Michelangelo, Rubens and Duchamp. Not minimally but maximally.

Megalomaniacally, one might say. But, how, then to account for his generosity towards his friends? Six barracks are devoted to Dan Flavin, an installation conceived in 1996 as Flavin, too, was dying. In what is considered to be a single sculpture, fluorescent tubes are installed in various combinations of pink, green, blue and yellow. Compared to that lively amusement park of a retrospective at the National Gallery in 2004, this work proves Flavin's sophisticated manipulation of optics. Flavin had the windows sealed shut on the sides of the barracks but installed two paned windows at the ends of the narrow buildings, vertical rectangles that glow with natural light and act as a counterbalance to the parallelograms of fluorescent light tubes. The intense halation of colored light that fills each barrack remains in the imagination as a sensation, a visual perfume.

Other buildings are dedicated to individual artists who appealed to Judd: Roni Horn, Carl Andre, John Wesley, Ilya Kabakov and Ingolfur Arnarsson. There are also works by Richard Long, Claes Oldenburg and David Rabinowitch.

The triumph of the moment is a temporary exhibition of rarely seen foam rubber sculptures by John Chamberlain. Consider their origins: Malibu; 1966; Chamberlain squeezes a sponge. The particulars must have been sensual, for these sculptures reek of sex. Each is poised on a pedestal. A cord squeezes the yellowing foam rubber into rolls, layers, tubes, globes and gaping orifices.

Two smaller buildings contain Chamberlain's recent photographs taken on his travels, often just striated abstract hues reminiscent of the surfaces of his metal sculptures.

A permanent installation of Chamberlain's sculptures made of smashed car parts is in the nearby town of Marfa. Dating from 1972 to 1982, the sculptures are massive and scattered throughout a converted mohair factory. They look like a shower of grounded asteroids. Or space trash. Surrounded by these lumpen hunks of broken chrome and brightly colored enamel, I spent a slightly surreal moment of lounging on the *Marfa Barge*, a room-sized sofa of foam rubber covered with beige sheets, watching Chamberlain's 1978 *The Secret Life of Fernando Cortez*, a film starring a ranting and flailing Taylor Mead.

Chamberlain is the current concern of the Chinati Foundation. It hosts a symposium on the artist, "It's All in the Fit," Apr. 22-23 in Marfa, with lectures by art historian William Agee and curators Klaus Kertess and Donna De Salvo, along with others, moderated by Richard Shiff, of the University of Texas, Austin. (For more info, see [www.chinati.org](http://www.chinati.org)).

The Judd Foundation, a separate organization from Chinati, permits tours of the artist's home, La Mansana, a compound surrounded by a double wall of adobe brick and mortar. Walking through the gate, a vast expanse of gravel is bordered on one side by his two-story house. There is a raised lap pool, pergola, picnic table and barbecue, all designed by the artist. On the opposite side, buildings contain his two libraries, where his 10,000 books were sorted by subject matter, the author's year of birth and country of origin, all alphabetized -- a system of organization conceived by the artist. The collections in the stack include the expected volumes on art, art history and philosophy -- but how to account for the numerous volumes in German, Russian and Scottish, when Judd did not speak any foreign languages or, more intriguingly, *The Joy of Lesbian Sex* and *The Ideal Massage*? A small room with a window looking out to the curving trunk of an old mesquite tree is where Judd sat and read, warmed by a small wood-burning stove.

One of Judd's studios contains examples of his earliest works, dating from the 1962 piece that his father helped him build out of recycled palettes and asphalt tile. They were brought to Marfa and after being installed just as he wanted them in this studio, Judd had the doors narrowed with brick so that none of the pieces could be removed without breaking down a wall. "It takes a great deal of time and thought to install work carefully," Judd said. A second, enormous gallery includes three of his fabricated stacks from between 1968 and 1975, each installed to the top of the white wall with an expanse of empty space defined by the hemispherical roof. The pieces appear to be shooting upward with a velocity both breathtaking and unexpected.

Much has been made of the collecting habits of the great Minimalist, and his modest living quarters are awash in Navajo blankets and turquoise jewelry, Indian baskets and Neo-classical Russian furniture. Perhaps it was Judd's Catholic personal taste in all things that led him to impose such order in his art.

Judd first saw Marfa when traveling on a troop train to serve as an American soldier in the Korean War. He was only 18, but sufficiently impressed to write a postcard about it to his

mother. He didn't return until 1973, when he bought his first property. At the time of this death, he owned three nearby ranches, most of what had been the old cavalry fort, and numerous buildings in downtown Marfa. The Dia art foundation provided much of the initial funding for his efforts, but Judd completed the project on his own after a falling out in the early 1980s. To continue his legacy, Chinati recently held an auction of donated art at Phillips that brought in around \$1.8 million. The Judd Foundation is raising money by selling a collection of the artist's sculptures, as well.

Driving to Marfa, I passed any number of towns that were being overrun by strip malls or blown away by lack of business. One of Judd's great artistic acts was to help preserve the essential character of the place without remaking it into something precious and inane.

Predictably, the regular influx of art tourists has led galleries to open, the most interesting of which is the non-profit Ballroom. Through July 30, the drawings and plans by mid-20th-century architect Victor Lundy are in the main space, while hyper-realist watercolors by his wife Anstis Lundy are in the smaller gallery. Ballroom co-founder Fairfax Dorn excitedly reported the plans for September: A new, custom-designed drive-in theater. The first film series is organized by Museum of Modern Art film and media curator Joel Siegel, and includes Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, which is sort of perfect for Marfians.

Even more to their credit is the only art installation that ever caused me to hit the brakes. Driving on the unpopulated U.S. 90 to El Paso, with thousands of acres of ranchland on either side, there is a single building looking like a large Judd box. "Prada Marfa"! This exact replica of a Prada store, complete with pale green interior and current merchandise in the window, was conceived by Danish-born Michael Elmgreen and Norwegian Ingar Dragset. The artists were commissioned by Ballroom along with the Art Production Fund. Gazing eagerly into the window, my friend exclaimed, "Look, there are my boots!"

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**TIPS FOR VISITING MARFA** Judd was not the first to discover Marfa's charms. *Giant* was filmed there in 1954 and the 1930s El Paisano Hotel has a shrine to James Dean in the lobby. Rooms are around \$150. Call (432) 729-3669.

A reservation at the hotel does not translate as a table for dinner at its restaurant, Jett's Grill. Since there are only two restaurants in town that serve dinner, it's crucial to reserve in advance -- the restaurant staff is easily overwhelmed and doesn't welcome unexpected diners.

The other evening dining option is Maiya's, which looks like it was transplanted directly from SoHo. Phone: (432) 729-3377. Both restaurants charge New York City prices, since tourists have to eat and the only other option is the Dairy Queen.

During the day, there are cafes. The Brown Recluse -- named for a poisonous spider -- is welcoming, with shelves of used books and cowboy boots for sale. The Austin City Café, a charming old house once owned by Judd and occupied by John Wesley, serves salads of greens from the backyard garden.

We stayed at the Thunderbird Motel, a '50s original renovated by the hip architectural firm of Lake/Flato. The phone number is (432) 729-4326. The \$150 rooms are clean, white and simple, with cowskin on the concrete floors, big platform beds with good sheets and roomy, bright bathrooms. The motel boasts a heated swimming pool, and a thermos of coffee brought to your room in the morning.

Unfortunately, no matter where you stay, a whistle-tooting train runs through town every night. Maybe that's why Judd needed all those naps!

For people unfamiliar with Donald Judd, Marfa's claim to fame is its "mystery lights," ghostly spots of light that supposedly appear above the desert at night to viewers looking south. Only a few people ever actually see them. But, in search of the show, we headed out on U.S. 90 where, ten miles east of town, is an adobe restroom with a back porch, the only structure for miles. There, dozens of people huddled under blankets in the evening cold and stared into the desert waiting. The stars were spectacular but after a decent interval of shivering and staring, we headed back to town. Along both sides of the highway, individual rabbits stood like signposts, their eyes reflecting red in the headlights. Motionless, not attempting to cross, but what were they doing? Forget the Marfa Mystery Lights. What about the Marfa Mystery Bunnies?

Back at the Thunderbird, J.D. was working in the office. She shook her head knowingly when we admitted that we hadn't seen any lights. "I know, but you had to go out there anyway."

How to get to Marfa? Fly into El Paso or Midland Odessa airports and rent a car -- it's a 200-mile drive. The Chinati Foundation offers guided tours from Wednesday through Sunday, beginning at 10 am. Phone: (432) 729-4362.



Ballroom Marfa, Photos by Vance Knowles  
And Ezra Gregg



Prada Marfa