RUBÉN MARTÍNEZ

Assembly Required: The Desert Cure

The transformative art of Noah Purifoy

Late one winter morning I drive off the asphalt and onto the loamy, rutted earth at the outer reaches of the village of Joshua Tree in Southern California's Mojave Desert. I am on a pilgrimage to see the work of assemblage artist Noah Purifoy, who in 1989 abandoned his longtime home in Los Angeles and remained in the desert until his death in 2004. On a ten-acre parcel near the perimeter of the Marine Corps Air and Ground Combat Center (half a million acres of chocolate mountains and sand dunes that serve as a simulacrum of the Middle East), Purifoy, one of the founders of the Watts Towers Art Center that rose from the ashes of the 1965 riots, spent the final years of his life creating the monumental "Outdoor Desert Art Museum of Assemblage Sculpture" made from tons of discarded materials. The "Environment" (the nickname a few critics and Purifoy himself sometimes used) is an astonishing feat of the imagination as much as it is a physical one.

In the desert, Noah Purifoy assembled a searing experience of life and loss that rises from sand and stone. I've been here several times, but I am never quite prepared for the sight of the Environment suddenly emerging from the Mojave. Innumerable manufactured objects of every material you can imagine—metal, wood, glass, plastic, porcelain, concrete, paper, cotton—are fastened to one another to create shapes alien and familiar, sublime and frightful. With its colossal scale, it is a veritable art-city whose overwhelming physicality has a profound resonance with my emotional geography.

I lived nearby on and off from the late 1990s to the mid-aughts. I was drawn by the light and space of the California desert—and by the fact that I was broke, broken, and needed a cheap place to live while I pulled my life back together. My story was not unlike that of many of my neighbors in the Mojave. People have been making healing journeys to the desert for a long time. There is something in Purifoy's art that sums up why I came to the desert and why I keep coming back, even as it stands for larger narratives that tell of a people and a time: us, now.

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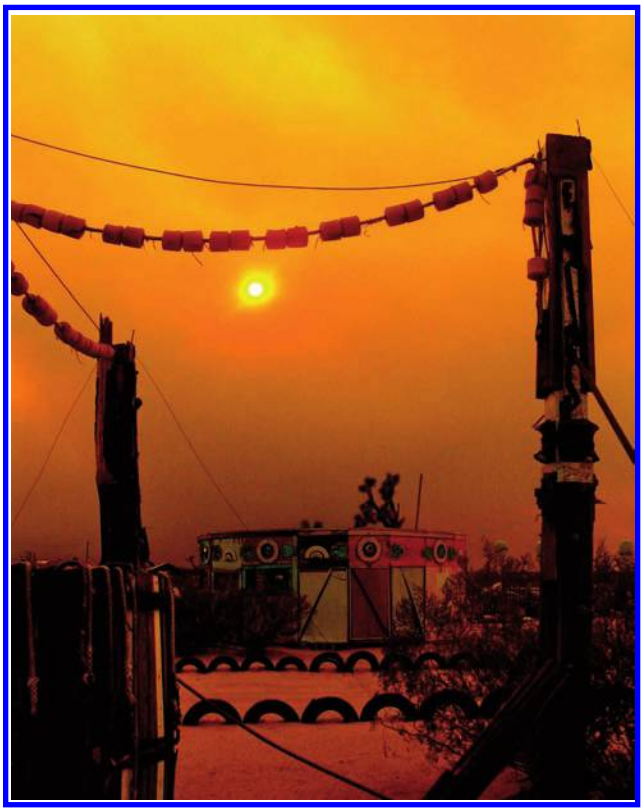
Shipwrecked, during the Sawtooth Complex Fire, 2006.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NOAH GARCIA-BROWN.

Long known as the gateway to Joshua Tree National Park, and with something of a reputation for skinheads and meth labs (ironic, given that so many of us came out here to get "clean"), the village has undergone a radical transformation in recent years. Art, real estate, and media have combined to produce the gentrified desert. What was once a modest, largely hidden outpost of outsider artists is now home to a thriving music and visual art scene. Concurrent with the growth of the art colony, Joshua Tree also became a destination for increasing numbers of "amenity migrants," the upper middle class seeking the authenticity of a rehabbed homestead shack and the greatest amenity of all—nature, the desert itself.

This was certainly not the desert Noah Purifoy came to in 1989, thanks to his longtime artist friend Debby Brewer, who offered him her property to create new work. There were no galleries or haute eateries then. There were lots of people who'd fled life "down below" (as the old-time residents of the high desert referred to Los Angeles and its endless suburbs) and had come seeking physical or spiritual renewal—like me. What Purifoy saw was a fantastic space to make art, without any of the limitations associated with the urban studio.

As usual, I am the only visitor when I arrive. There is no attendant to charge an entrance fee or hand me a map, no pedantic docent. The Noah Purifoy Foundation, which oversees the property, takes appointments online, but promotion is modest. Even so, some 2,500 art seekers make the trip annually. A dry storm is passing through, a



Shipwrecked (detail); in background, Carousel.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NOAH GARCIA-BROWN.

stiff wind rapidly driving swatches of dark cumulus across the sky. The property sits on a plateau with a view both of the park and the Marine base, which, geologically speaking, look exactly alike—it's all Mojave. Today, there are no training exercises underway; when there are, detonations tear the air and make the earth shudder, coils of oily smoke rise over the mountains, convoys kick up dust on the dunes. Then, there is a great contradiction in the Mojave, between the military's desert and the one preserved by the California Desert Wilderness Protection Act, which created the national park.

The experience of the Environment begins with its siting. It lies in a borderland where several deserts overlap. Desert as wilderness (both in the spiritual and ecological sense). Desert-cool (Route 66, the ghost of country-rock legend

Avant-garde technique forged by social conflagration.

Untitled. PHOTOGRAPH BY NOAH GARCIA-BROWN.

Gram Parsons, alien sightings). Desert as place to hide (the meth lab), or place to get away (today's boutique desert). Military desert, bohemian desert. There is an inevitable dialogue between this environment and the Environment.

The overall work consists of dozens of self-contained pieces. Each reflects a particular formal challenge—engineering problems solved according to the materials used, and Purifoy's own oft-stated goal of breaking with linearity—as well as a peculiarly strong human narrative for such conceptual and abstract art. Purifoy, who spent his childhood in segregated poverty in Alabama, studied at the Chinouard School of Art in Los Angeles after World War II. His turn toward assemblage was cemented by the riots of 1965, after which he collected neon melted by the fires and fashioned *Sixty-six Signs of Neon*, a work that was widely exhibited. Avant-garde technique forged by social conflagration.

The main entrance is formed by a dirt lane bordered by car tires, a few of them whitewalls, half-submerged in the earth—we are being led on a path into another kind of desert. The first major work past the portal is *Carousel*, which, as its title suggests, is a circular structure made of scrap wood. Instead of carousel animals, it contains a battery of vintage computer monitors, keyboards, printers, and an empty chair placed before a kind of command module. The interior walls are covered with decidedly analog artifacts—acoustic musical instruments, several snow skis, a shelf stacked with random books (I pick up a crumbling paperback edition of *Cosell by Cosell*, sportscasting legend Howard Cosell's autobiography), sets of dominoes (white

Logic and chronology unravel.

tiles separated from black), a wall of hubcaps. Like every other environment here, *Carousel* is alive with movement. The wind causes loose electrical cables to swing, pieces of metal to clang, scraps of clothing to flutter, wood to creak. Purifoy reveled in the idea that his work would be rapidly transformed in the extreme climate of the desert.

Segregation is an omnipresent leitmotif—sometimes subtle, sometimes overt. Here, sitting atop wood posts, are five street lamp covers in a row, the big kind that line highways. Standing at eye-level, they are placed vertically instead of horizontally, the socket for the absent bulb facing away from the viewer. One of the covers is charcoal-colored; the others are a distinctly paler industrial gray. The very next environment up the pathway makes the point brutally direct. *White/Colored* is a plywood wall painted white, the wood splintering in the dryness of the desert, the paint flaking. Attached to the wall are two drinking fountains. The "white" fountain is an office cooler. The "colored" is a toilet with a drinking faucet affixed to the seat.

Whenever I visit the Environment, I attempt a structured tour. I begin by following a path suggested by the forms and their narratives. I fail every time. Logic and chronology unravel amid the overwhelming quantity of shapes and profusion of objects that compose them. Toilets appear in several works, (sometimes comically, never scatologically), the porcelain gleaming now as the clouds part to reveal a

White/Colored. PHOTOGRAPH BY NOAH GARCIA-BROWN.

Sculpture Garden.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE NOAH PURIFOY FOUNDATION.

The White House.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE NOAH PURIFOY FOUNDATION.

silver winter sun. Bowling balls, most of them black, some on the ground, others crowning poles. Glass is ubiquitous too, clear and mirrored, most of it in shards, creating paths that cannot be walked. Decorative lava rock and pebbly gravel, vacuum cleaners, and coat hangers. Stacks and stacks of books and newspapers and magazines—seemingly enough to fill a mid-sized city library.

Metal is as common as wood in Purifoy's installations—light and heavy, aluminum and wrought iron, roofing and fireplace grills—and one sculpture featuring industrial shavings fashioned into the shape of a champagne cork. There are several nods at robots: droid-like figures, vehicles like Mars rovers, all stationary as if their batteries had long ago wound down, as if the civilization that created them was extinct. And in several environments there are clothes, every kind of article, underwear and blouses, work shirts and suits, shoes and hats and jeans.

The more obvious narratives constantly are disrupted by juxtapositions whimsical, absurd, and utterly other: a mostly illegible fragment of the Declaration of Independence engraved on tin, crumbling mannequins, wine bottles cemented into cinder blocks, and everywhere, the natural world lurking, teasing, overwhelming the aesthetic realm. Clusters of creosote bushes dance in the wind between structures, cholla cactus thorn-balls creep into enclosures; the landforms on the horizon widen the frame of each

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of the environments and the overall Environment. At his most ambitious, Purifoy insinuated himself into the very earth, digging a rectangular trench about fifteen feet deep, supporting the walls with rebar and panels of corrugated steel. Built in 1999, *Earth Piece* is slowly collapsing—earth molding art.

There are very few human forms aside from mannequins and, conspicuously, the dressed-up legs and feet in *From the Point of View of Little People*. But there are plenty of ghosts and those are very nearly corporeal. There are no bodies hanging from *Gallows*, but we can imagine them clearly since all that is missing on the scaffolding—again, of wood painted white—is the noose. There are several variations of living quarters, some fully enclosed, one with walls but no roof, another just a couple of chairs and a couch in front of a fireplace out in the open. The most ambitious is the large, galleon-shaped *Shelter*, which includes a TV sitting next to a cot, and an enormous amount of clothes sitting in bins of wood and chicken wire and hanging from the ceiling. The American home shipwrecked in the desert.

I recently finished writing a book about my time in the desert, which includes a long story of addiction. Perhaps that is why I can write now of the Environment, which is as powerful an emotional journey as it is one of ideas, fusing subjective experience to the history of manufactured form. Perhaps the greatest ghost of all here is the human labor that produced every single object in the Environment. In all it is the California dream and its reversal writ apocalyptically large—boom and bust, which we can't help but feel so very pointedly and poignantly in these times. Situating his

From the Point of View of Little People. PHOTOGRAPH BY RUBÉN MARTÍNEZ.

masterpiece in the desert provided Purifoy with mythic depth and a metaphor for both devastation and restoration. For every serrated edge, for every "broken" object here, there is always a connection to another object, which in turn connects to another, and that one to yet another—assemblage artists are masters of fastening—and ultimately what was broken is mended, shaped not into the functional, but into the abstraction of art without which our spirits cannot heal. **B**