

The **Land Arts Exhibition** at **LHUCA** presents creative responses to the American desert and is the culmination of two expeditions led by Chris Taylor of Texas Tech University, writes *Herbert Wright*

It came from out of the desert, and took residence in a warehouse space in Lubbock, Texas. The desert genie found expression through creations in various media – sculpture, painting, poetry, performance, installation...

This is the Land Arts 2012 Exhibition at the Louise Hopkins Underwood Center for the Arts (LHUCA), which ran until 3 May this year. The artworks were the culmination of two great journeys by 12 student architects and artists that covered 6,000 miles across American deserts to examine the interaction of geomorphology and human construct.

Chris Taylor, professor of architecture at Texas Tech University and leader of the annual Land Arts of the American West programme, describes the challenge the expeditions present to their participants as 'likely be the most difficult thing they have ever done intellectually, emotionally, and physically, but offering an experience that shifts one's perception to place,

culture, and how both are shaped'.

The programme included performance art, model-making and meetings with desert thinkers and experts, all out in the wilderness. The students encountered built structures ranging from the ruins of cliff-dwellings to an observatory that pushes the boundaries of cosmology.

The first expedition, last September, went from west Texas into New Mexico, crossing Utah and Nevada to the Grand Canyon and back, and included two seminal land artworks: Spiral Jetty, the sculptural intervention in Great Salt Lake built by Robert Smithson in 1970, and Sun Tunnels, Nancy Holt's 1976 configuration of giant concrete pipes, as well as mines, archeological ruins, Cold War military installations, and natural wonders such as salt flats.

The second expedition, in October, stopped at Marfa, Texas, and reached the Coolidge Dam in Arizona, one of the great feats of Twenties civil engineering. That trek included a visit to the Very Large Array radio observatory of 27 25m-wide dishes built in 1980 in New Mexico and upgraded just last year.

At Marfa, the sculptor Donald Judd (see p23) created a vast installation museum on ex-military land. Taylor says that 'the clarity of implementation in how he used found spaces, peeled back or lightly modified, to become permanent sites for works of art is powerful'. Major artists are represented there, but for Taylor, 'the reason to visit remains Judd's 100 mill-finish aluminum boxes. It's both a deeply powerful work fusing art, landscape and architecture'.

But rather than nominate particular favourites from any of the sites visited, Taylor says: 'I am often

captivated by failed industry – mining, military testing, agriculture, settlement – in the desert. Not because of the failure per se, but because of what the site says about our values as a culture... Looking at past marks in the land, from immediate past to deep time, can help calibrate our relation to place.'

Although it is 'a harsh landscape that does not suffer foolish schemes

## THE DESERT HAS LONG-INSPIRED ARTISTS, SO IT'S NO SURPRISE TO FIND INTERESTING WORKS IN THE LHUCA SHOW

lightly, humanity does not give up out there. Currently, American cities continue to sprawl recklessly into the desert, highlighting the issue of sustainability.

Taylor sees the same issues that have been faced before, for example by the ancestral Pueblo people who built structures such as the Moon House complex (1150-1300) that was visited: 'The fundamental challenges of places like Phoenix or Las Vegas are vested in their ability to design a future where they can exist within the resources and limits of their geography. Importing resources – water, energy, food – from afar is both dangerous and rarely workable on long timescales. The lessons have been there for centuries – activating them is the challenge and it will need to occur on a cultural scale.'

(Architect Paolo Soleri, who died in April after 43 years of building the Arcosanti community in Arizona, had a Utopian, ecological vision of urban life in the desert, which Taylor acknowledges, but Arcosanti was not on the 2012 Land Arts itineraries).

Taylor also sees a poetic analogy for our desert outposts – the 'sky islands' found in places such as the southern Arizona desert. 'They are mountainous ecosystems where ranges of distinct flora and fauna live isolated by desert floor', he explains.

'They work because the resources to sustain live exists within them, largely controlled by elevation and moisture levels.' The implication is that we can live in the desert, but only within the niches where it provides resources.

Whatever the lessons for humanity in the desert, it has also long-inspired artists, so it's no surprise to find interesting works in the LHUCA show. Some relate very directly to what was seen on the expeditions. For example, poet Katy Chrisler's work, comprising pottery shards and sculpted thorns on black plates, is entitled *Aftermath* or *Very Small Array*, while artist Maura Murname showed



Above: Visiting Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels, near Lucin, Utah, 10 September 2012

Left: Visiting Coolidge Dam, San Carlos Apache Reservation, Arizona, 23 October 2012

Opposite page: Far left, above: Zoe Berg performs at the Land Arts 2012 Exhibition, opening at LHUCA, Lubbock, Texas in April 2013

Far left, below: Suspended structures by Jigga Patel cast rectilinear shadows on the floor of exhibition in the LHUCA Warehouses

Left: Ariel Ruvinsky's Hermit Altar uses found objects in her exploration of piety in a Cold War context



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS TAYLOR, LAND ARTS OF THE AMERICAN WEST



video footage of tumbleweed through a mirror cube.

Others were more abstract: architecture student Jigga Patel suspended neo-Miesian constructs of wood to cast rectilinear shadows on the floor. Ariel Ruvinsky offered *Hermit Altar*, a work that continues her ongoing exploration of piety that had surfaced in her work at Goldsmiths College, London but is here in the context of nuclear war. Meanwhile her extraordinary installation *Incendiary Landscape* creates an artificial but circumscribed

landscape in the light of rocket flare-like bulbs and an ambiguous Sun framed black in a tyre.

The Land Arts programme is now in its 10th year, and promises more years of creative response to the desert. But, as Taylor has observed, until the wider response is cultural, new habitats built in the desert are likely to fail, as they have before. But despite freeze/thaw cycles and wind erosion, the desert preserves them, and they will linger like the land art out there, monumental structures indifferent to our absence.