

A savage journey to the art of Marfa

From the artist's Marfa residency—sponsored by *Big Bend Sentinel*

By **KENNY SCHACHTER**

9/29—An auspicious start, broken down beside the highway, that began my version of *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*

I rented the only manual car (within reason, price-wise) in the state of Texas from Turo, the peer-to-peer carsharing company, which allows private owners to loan out their vehicles via an app, in preparation for my two-week writing, art and design exhibit/residency in Marfa, under the auspices of the Big Bend Sentinel newspaper (founded in 1926). If I'm not preoccupied shifting gears, my mind has a tendency to wander—more so than usual—and I'm a bad enough driver as it is.

Barely out of the Midland, Texas, airport parking lot, the "check engine" light began flickering as my rental car was in the midst of a mechanical failure. Not long after, I found myself stranded by the side of the highway for what lasted a few hours, all told. When I phoned the owner requesting a search and rescue mission (okay, demanding), he chastised me for renting such an old car, which happened to be his 2014 Toyota Corolla, with 167,000 miles on the clock.

I was finally found on a remote shoulder where my vehicle was replaced with an old pickup truck that wasn't in much better condition

café (a former funeral home and country music venue) where I've ubiquitously decamped like an ornament on the hood of an old car, writing in real time.

The idea was to actively engage with the residents over two weeks, from artists to locals, assimilating into the landscape and documenting the process, as opposed to parachuting in for a few days and making a hasty retreat after devouring a dose of Judds. The disparate group of people I met was comprised of only a smattering of artists, contrary to my expectations, until the Chinati art weekend and gala beginning October 9 through 12, in any event.

An enterprising developer from Houston with some previous art exposure, Tim Crowley, opened an art infused hotel I was staying in (before checking into an Airbnb), the neighborhood theatre and a small art/fashion/design studio building. Surprisingly, Tim informed me that the majority of visitors don't make the trek here for art, but instead for the vast parks,



They might consider hanging similar such signs outside NYC auction houses and the mega galleries dotting the globe. Maybe I will, upon my return, shhh...

observatory, and, oddly enough, Marfa is a major wedding destination. May as well formalize your marital relationship in the desolate wilderness before you end up in an emotional one. I'm kidding.

My postbox sculpture is a formal homage to Judd, albeit with a satirical slant. There is a functional mail slot on one side of the 3-foot square stainless-steel cube. Nevertheless, nothing that goes in—whether notes from devotees seeking to commune with the divine presence many ascribe to Judd or more pedestrian, as a repository for café detritus—can ever be retrieved. Besides the spring-loaded flap, the cube necessitates a bevy of brawn to move, yet upend, as it weighs as much as a typical Judd (i.e. a lot).

Typical of my encounters tapping away at my table, I met an amiable elder artist with an



I got the hat, the long shadow. All that is missing is a pair of boots. But where would my ubiquitous custom red and gold laces fit?

unforeseen connection to my piece: he hailed from a family of multiple generations of mail carriers.

My exhibit and writing stint got off to a particularly embarrassing start that I'll blame on the cliché that Americans possess a notoriously poor sense of geography, rather than my own intellectual shortcomings (there are far too many to note), when Tim Johnson, the proprietor of the Marfa Book Company, introduced himself. Tim caught me in the midst of studying a grade school, color-coded map of the U.S. to determine where on earth I was.



In the desert environs of minimalism, even the cars bear witness.

Johnson was described as "a poet, editor, small-town flaneur, musician, and prolific collaborator" by Joshua Edwards, in a 2011 interview on the Poetry Society of America website. <https://poetrysociety.org/poems-essays/interviews/an-interview-with-tim-johnson-of-the-marfa-book-company>. Tim is indicative of the wide and wonderful array of creatives that litter the far western reaches of the Chihuahuan Desert, particularly in the immediate vicinity of Marfa.

10/4—The whole enchilada(s), my dangerous driving and desert art-habbing



Mr. Border Patrol agent wasn't terribly amused by my sneaky snap; I better watch it before I am next to be bundled off on a flight to god knows' where.



The boots were made for walking and though the sculptures weren't—because of the expansion and contraction of the metal, they come to life, albeit it ever so imperceptibly.

I showed up just shy of 9 a.m., as I pretty much do 7 days a week, to a packed café and found my sculpture serving as a tabletop for more enchiladas than I'd ever seen in one place, a few backpacks, and a puddle of water pooled beside it all. Safe to say, the steel is no longer stainless.

Regardless, I resigned myself to such occurrences as this is what I knowingly signed up for. The upside? This exercise is proving therapeutic in combating my fanatical obsessive-compulsive disorder. Admittedly, I long to return home to New York if only to brandish my sponge and resume where I left off—scrubbing and scouring.

What was more amusing, when I jumped into my truck on the way to "work"—it's only a few minutes from my hotel (everything is in Marfa town) but needed to drive somewhere after, and in the midst of an illegal U-turn, un-seatbelted, I was waved to proceed by a considerate driver heading in the opposite direction. The vehicle that let me cut in front, I only noticed after the 3-point maneuver, well performed I might add, was, in fact, the town sheriff! I burst out laughing, in an oh-fuck-could-I-be-any-stupid-act-of-capitulation. He just smiled back and kept on truckin'. People really are kind here.

I know lots of artsy-fartsy types in and around Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the art and music industries (if you can refer to them as businesses, anymore) which happen to be nearby to the famed rehab clinic, the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation. No coincidence there, like the old Roach Motel advert, they check-in for treatment and don't check-out of the sur-



This country and their guns. Arggh, enough.

roundings. Sorry for the inappropriate joke, but I'm a recovering addict myself.

Similarly—kind of—in this neck of the...desert, there are lots of Juddites that after internships, residencies or foundation positions have established footholds in and around town, from Christopher Wool to countless others. Like many before and after, Wool, who lives between New York and Marfa with his brilliant wife, painter Charline von Heyl, was lured back in 2006-7 after a residency, which was a familiar account I heard again and again.

10/5—Judd: the hoarder with order who also had the hots for a bit of hot air

I've been trying to avoid the elephant in the barrel-ceilinged barracks, Donald Judd,



An apparition appeared not long after the launch of my sculpture, furniture and writing residency that bore an uncanny resemblance to the ghost of Donald Judd casting his imprimatur over the enterprise.

who fabricated his way into the canons of art, design and architecture history. But I'll share a few thoughts on the subject without resorting to rehashed clichés (hopefully). Most incongruously, the godfather of minimalism was a monumental magpie that out-accumulated even me. Imagine that. But where we differ most dramatically is the fact that Judd was a hoarder with order—everything, and there were lots (and lots of lots), was compartmentalized and codified in the extremis.

The scope of Judd's holdings traversed Navajo rugs; furniture and design by Alvar Aalto, Mies van der Rohe, Gerrit Rietveld, Rudolph Schindler, Gustav Stickley; and art by George Earl Ortman, Agnes Martin, Lucas Samaras, Jasper Johns, Yayoi Kusama, H.C. Westermann, John Wesley, Fred Sandback, Roni Horn, among many others. The avid bibliophile collected more books than the Library of Congress, which Trump hasn't gotten around to pruning—just yet.

Another Juddian tidbit not widely known was his penchant for pipes—bagpipes that is. Judd collected examples of the (wildly annoying, to me) woodwind instrument that, before they were even known in Scotland, originated in the Middle East or North Africa, and dated at least to ancient Egypt (around 400 BC) and perhaps even earlier—according to AI anyway. Best of all was his stated reasoning for insisting on bagpipe performances at many of his openings and said to be constantly playing in the background of his NYC building on Spring Street: "When the bagpipes start, the conversations end."

10/7—Breathing architecture and artworks that walk

The ginormous, barrel-shaped, galvanized iron roofs of the artillery sheds and military airplane hangars repurposed by Judd to house portions of his encyclopedic collections of art, design, books (and bagpipes!) are wondrous in and of themselves. Everything he breathed on, despite the conceptual rigidity and austerity that most would equate with his all-encompassing

Weltanschauung (worldview), in actuality, is imbued with heartfelt passion and humanity.

Another widely held misconception of Judd, that I admittedly acceded to, was his bellicose espousal of the dictum: form over function. His life's work is, to me at least, a utopic vision obstinate in focus but also unstinting in his embrace of artists he responded to (that were or became friends, like Roni Horn), facilitating commissions permanently situated throughout Marfa. I was admittedly taken aback by how touched I was and, moreover, the devoted community of custodians that tend to it all and explicate to the droves of tougoers with a grace and tenderness akin to caretakers in a hospice.

The architecture and artworks, though, exude mortal qualities that took me aback. The



This place and its inhabitants are damn nice and awfully adorable. If I did get myself a custom pair of boots, this would be the inspiration.

buildings and sculptures speak, communicate—well, they randomly radiate sounds—through a series of pings, dings and rings that are audible as you make your way through the environs. If any foundation curators are reading this, I'd like to install sensitive recording equipment in the vaulted rooftops and amidst the grid of 100 untitled works in mill aluminum, 1982–1986, large scale sculptures that form an endless

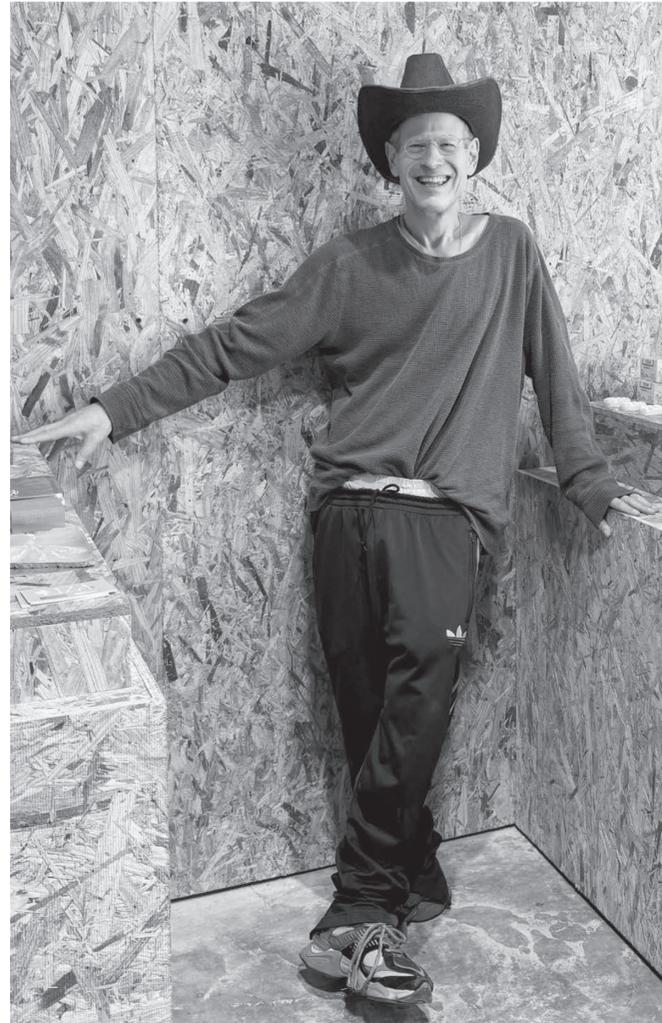


And another new pal, DZ Cantu, the tatted up country-music-musician-Data-Tech-PHD-professor, he seamlessly out-hyphenated my disparate art world doings.

horizon in two of the Chinati structures.

One last thing regarding the 100 untitled works. Due to extremes of temperature, these pieces possess additional seemingly humanoid tendencies, perpetually incrementally shifting over the course of the nearly 40 years they've been "living" in the sheds—sorry for my characterization, Donald. A curator referred to the movements, caused by expansions and contractions of the metal, as the sculptures' "walking." I hope the animation I'm working on depicting this phenomenon (in my, umm, inimitable manner) doesn't exacerbate the grave-spinning of Judd I may have stirred already.

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When in Marfa... I picked up this denim beauty—the sun is so strong this is no mere fashion accessory (but that too) from the ethical cowboy shop across the street from the Sentinel, go check it out!



S.O.S. send help...fast! My disabled rental car failed me not long into the 3-hour trip from Midland airport; thankfully I came prepared for just such an occurrence with an ample supply of ibuprofen.

than what preceded it, with a mere 157,000 miles. After the switch transpired, I hunkered down for what ensued, a very fast 3-hour drive, as every airport is at least as far from the art and nature destination. So began my Marfa adventure, where I was swiftly installed as the newest cub reporter covering the art beat.

10/1—A brief Introduction as to why, exactly, I came to Marfa

Artist-writer-designer-architect-developer Donald Judd (I'm jealous of his multiple multi-hyphenates) staked his claim on the remote—to put it mildly—old U.S. cavalry fort established in 1911 to defend against incursions and smuggling from both sides of the border during the Mexican Revolution. Before Judd, Marfa was most famous for serving as the location of the 1956 film *Giant*, starring Elizabeth Taylor, James Dean, and Rock Hudson, that filmed in the area, and the historic Hotel Paisano, which served as the base for cast and crew.

Judd began purchasing a succession of 22 buildings beginning in the early 1970s and, after construction launched in 1979, culminated in the establishment of the Chinati Foundation that opened to the public in 1986. Upon his death in 1994, a parallel institution, the Judd Foundation, was established. The town has become an art, design and architecture mecca over the years, attracting hundreds of thousands that have made the pilgrimage, a number of whom remained.

The basis of my project in Juddville, entitled *Postbox*, is a lone sculpture, a few photos and some furniture I designed—a desk and chairs—in the reductive language of the master maestro of minimalism, Donald Judd. My installation, by choice, was plopped down smack in the middle of the bustling Sentinel newspaper



My failing car was replaced by a faltering truck—I think it suits me though and would be useful in the mean, potholed streets of NYC.