



WHERE THE



# RIVER BENDS

A young man, during a long trip west from Alabama to Los Angeles en route to a military deployment, stops in Marfa. The year is 1946. He returns three decades later, fleeing what he calls the "harsh and glib situation within art in New York." What has become of Marfa and how we see the landscape after Donald Judd?

I wrote a good part of my book *Desert America* during my stay in Marfa as a fellow of the Lannan Foundation. Established in 2000, the program is itself a sign of the town's transformation. The foundation bought five houses and a storefront in Marfa, keeping the exteriors quaint and rustic while renovating the interiors with modernist precision: white walls, blond cabinetry, stainless steel appliances.

By the time of my residency, I had already visited Marfa and the Big Bend region several times, drawn by the fantastic light and space of West Texas, and by its proximity to the border. Like most of the art colonies in the region, its roots were in the Old Western economy (cattle ranching, oil). Hollywood had put the town on the map when it came calling in the 1950s to shoot *Giant*, the cast and crew moving into the Hotel Paisano, where there is still an Elizabeth Taylor Suite. But the origin of the colony itself came with the arrival in 1979 of Donald Judd, the legendary "nonrelational" artist, a minimalist master who has become so revered that "WWDJD?" (What Would Donald Judd Do?) bumper stickers and buttons have become a kind of Masonic handshake in the art world.

Judd perfectly fit the role of art colony pioneer. He started his career in New York, establishing a studio in SoHo long before it was branded with high-end galleries. Colony founders must be iconoclasts, and after two decades of promoting himself to the top of the art world—he garnered a retrospective at the Whitney before he was forty—he was ready for a turn as a visionary.

In the 1970s, Judd marveled at the real estate prices, which, compared to those in lower Manhattan, were astonishingly cheap. Marfa, like the ranching that had sustained it, was well past its prime, and its population was in steep decline. Judd snatched up some 40,000 acres of ranchland with the help of the Dia Art Foundation—bankrolled by the Houston oil heiress Philippa de Menil and her husband, Heiner Friedrich, a German art dealer. And in the town itself he bought property that had once comprised Fort D. A. Russell and earlier military facilities dating back to 1911. After a successful suit against Dia for breach of contract, the land became his.

The counterculture at the time revered such acts of "dropping out," and Judd was simultaneously dipping into some of the oldest tropes of the American colonial imagination: the trip west, the close encounter with a hard land and its ghosts, the lonesome figure on the far plain.

In Marfa, Judd created permanent works that he meticulously sited on the land, most notably, an array of aluminum boxes in an old military installation. In his will he stipulated that they never be moved. There is no evidence that he considered the possibility that his work, and the fulsome attention it generated, would result in a wave of gentrification that re-created in Marfa the very atmosphere that drove him from New York in the first place.

When I came to Marfa, the Chinati Foundation, which Judd founded after his feud with Dia, was a bona fide site of interna-

Previous Page: A sweeping view of the Chihuahuan desert and the silhouette of the Crowley House. Photo by Paul Hester.

BY  
RUBÉN  
MARTINEZ

An excerpt from *Desert America: Boom and Bust in the New Old West* (Metropolitan/Holt, 2012).

tional art pilgrimage. An independent bookseller, the Marfa Book Company, had established itself in a smartly rehabbed building next to the town's only stoplight. A high-end restaurant called Maiya's had snagged a Rhode Island School of Design graduate for a chef. Galleries with brilliant white walls and track lighting displayed lots of canvases with anything but a recognizable figure on them. And hot young kids were hanging out, some of them with real money and some of them flirting with it.

Marfa's second boom began slowly after Judd rolled into town; his arrival brought a few other artists, who also bought up land on the cheap. The newcomers were romanced by the signs of the past. There were railroad tracks, upon which trains clacked through a couple of times a day, meaning you could hear train whistles. The tracks, of course, also meant that there was another side of them. (More on that later.)

So: lots of land, lots of old adobes, lots of light and space, and lots of "characters"—the salt of the earth working farms and nurseries, crusty ranchers and ranch hands, guy-guys. And the Rio Grande was just below the plain, John Wayne and John Ford's Great River, on the other side of which was Mexico.

All Marfa needed to really take off was a major piece of journalism in a national medium. *The New York Times* obliged, publishing an article in 2005 by a writer named Julia Lawlor, who authored several travel-and-real-estate pieces for the paper during the boom. Most of her stories sold destinations and properties to the gentry of what the *Times* itself heralded as the New Gilded Age.

The story begins with Mary Farley, a Manhattan psychotherapist, buying three "decrepit one-story adobe buildings" whose only inhabitants were a "family of bats." Farley plans to renovate all three,

keeping one as her residence and converting the others to art studios. There follows a quick cautionary tale about fellow Manhattanites Tom Rapp and Toshi Sakihara, who buy an adobe without looking inside it only to discover structural disaster. But the couple, who eventually open Marfa's toniest restaurant, turn the property around to another second-home seeker, for a \$30,000 profit.

The story includes a brief mention that the newcomers are arriving in a town with severe social schisms: "Marfa real estate is beyond the means of lower-income residents, many of them Latinos who make up about 60 percent of the population."

The final paragraph contains a classic of the genre: the older gentry's lament about the new. Two early investors talk about arriving when Marfa was still an "unspoiled beauty." One of them is Eugene Binder, a New York art dealer. "I liked it the way it was," he says. "I got here before they put in street signs." Binder spends four months of the year in Marfa. The other grump is Aedwyn Darroll, another New York artist, who moved in not long after Judd's death. "There's all the phoniness of the art world," he laments, "the art-speak stuff. It's exactly what I was trying to get away from in the city."

It was, of course, the likes of Judd, Binder, and Darroll who brought the art world they're now lamenting when others followed them.

**T**he town's population has remained stable, at about twenty-five hundred, which means that, generally speaking, for every person moving in there is another moving out—outlanders replacing the natives, largely the creative class replacing ranching families.

Native-born Valda Livingston is facilitating much of this movement as a real estate agent, but even she's

## ALL MARFA NEEDED TO TAKE OFF WAS A MAJOR PIECE OF JOURNALISM IN A NATIONAL MEDIUM.

ambivalent about the new money pouring in from the "fat cats." Not the ones she's selling Marfa to, but the really rich ones, like Austin gazillionaire Steve Smith, who pumped \$100 million into the Lajitas Resort, on the banks of the Rio Grande just north of Big Bend State Park. Previous to Smith, the land included a nine-hole golf course and an RV park. Smith bought in 2000, and what he wrought here was an outsized variation of what the new haute classes were doing all over the country: the nine holes became eighteen; he built the exclusive Ultimate Hideout, a ninety-two-room luxury hotel specifically with burnt-out CEOs like himself in mind, those men hard at work making and remaking the world; and he envisioned selling lots and homes on the 27,000-acre holding.

But Lajitas is on the border. Wherever you go on the resort, you have a view of Mexico and Mexicans, which means that Smith's hideout couldn't avoid being in the known world, after all. Lajitas never turned a profit and ultimately declared bankruptcy. There was another uber-resort in the area. Cibolo Creek Ranch was reserved for A-list Hollywood and rock 'n' roll royalty. Valda just wishes they'd go back to where they came from.



Borunda's Bar is one of the few places in Marfa these days that is not haute. When I walk in, there is no one around but the proprietor, Pancho Borunda, and a cardboard cutout of a trio of Budweiser girls in black minidresses. Pancho cuts a Falstaffian-biker figure, with a long, gray-and-white beard. The first thing he wants me to know is that he does not serve specialty drinks.

"I have people coming in all the time asking me for mineral water with lime," he says, rolling his eyes. "They even ask me what I cooked my beans in."

The "artsy-fartsy types," he says, are disappointed to learn that he uses "manteca"—lard. "You want Mexican beans? You have to use lard," he says.

Pancho's aunt ran a restaurant in town for years. She cooked on a woodstove. There was one hard rule if you ate at her place: no spirits. She allowed her patrons to bring in two beers and no more. If anyone was caught nipping, Tía would come running from the kitchen with a frying pan.

Pancho says he left town for the navy, was stationed in Spokane, and led a whole life up there, twenty-three years. He returned to Marfa ten years ago, "before all this happened." When he left Marfa, the town was barely emerging from segregation.

"The Mexicans couldn't go across the railroad tracks after ten at night," Pancho tells me.

And the only place the Mexicans could swim was a little sliver of Alamito Creek that wasn't fenced in—a miracle in these parts, where there is so little public land and every inch of the private is fenced off.

If Valda Livingston were in the bar right now, there would be a great reality-TV moment, because a fight would break out. When I asked her about Marfa's segregated past, her cheeks reddened. "I don't think there was any discrimination until someone put that in their heads," she said. "They had the same opportunities as everyone else."

Notwithstanding Livingston's claims of equal opportunity, the town was and is neatly divided by the railroad tracks. Long past *Brown v. Board of Education*, Mexican students could only attend the Blackwell School from kindergarten through eighth grade; Marfa's movie theaters and churches were also segregated.

I go to visit Judd's boxes at the Chimati Foundation. In the visitor center there is merchandise for sale. Judd books, Judd T-shirts, Judd coffee mugs. Our tour guide introduces himself by his first name only. "Chris" is every inch an art student, aloof and laconic.

We head straight for the main attraction, the Quonset huts that house the boxes. Chris gives us a thumbnail history. In 1911, he says, Camp Marfa, the precursor to

Fort D. A. Russell, was established here in response to the ferment of the Mexican Revolution spilling over the border; the fort was commissioned in 1930. During World War II, prominent German POWs were held here, some of them assisting the United States in conducting research on chemical weapons. The base was decommissioned in 1946.

Chris leaves out a crucial part of the history: in 1924, with anti-Mexican sentiment boiling after years of refugees streaming across the border—and with Prohibition-era smuggling in full swing—the United States established the modern Border Patrol. Facilities for personnel in the area moved several times over the decades, but various parts of the complex have been used continuously by the BP since it was founded. The building that houses the Marfa Sector Headquarters, which coordinates twelve stations and substations in its 135,000-square-mile area of operations, remains on land that was once Fort D. A. Russell.

Chris opens the door to the first Quonset building. Corrugated tin arches above simple brick-and-mortar walls. Evenly spaced vertical concrete pylons support a series of horizontal concrete pylons to hold the ceiling in place. The floor is a grid of plain concrete slabs. An even number of windows on the long sides of the building bring in magnificent natural light.

Here are the boxes. I am shocked at my first glimpse of them, even though I've seen photographs. What astonishes is the repetition, an array radically focused on four-sided forms. They are not literally all "boxes" but dozens of permutations of rectangles fitted together with industrial rivets. There are boxes within boxes, boxes divided by slanted panels, boxes that look like IKEA entertainment-center hutches.

The effect of so many rectangles is overwhelming, and not just because of the boxes themselves. The windows, the doors, the support columns, the ceiling panels, even the rectangles of light pouring through the rectangles of windows onto the rectangular slabs of concrete that make up the floor create a rectilinear universe of frames and of frames within frames. I notice that the bricks in the walls are rectangles. Now I see rectangles in the space between boxes. Is Judd messing with the viewer? Daring you to relate his nonrelational art to some kind of, any kind of, human narrative?

Previous Page: Railroad tracks stir romance and nostalgia even as they mark a segregated past.  
Photo by Amanda Valentine.



These photos were taken by Paul Hester for an article by William F. Stern published in the Spring-Summer 1988 issue of *Cite*. At the time, Donald Judd still lived and worked in the compound that would become the Chinati Foundation.

**Clockwise:** Exterior of the compound; arena courtyard looking toward the barracks; milled aluminum piece; and interior of the Artillery Shed with milled aluminum pieces.



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No, Judd would insist, it is just form. Purely, simply, grandiosely, and maddeningly form. He would probably have been irritated by any critic attempting a historical and social contextualization.

But then why did Chris tell us that German POWs were held here? Surely I'm not the only one who immediately thought of repetition being an element of fascist architecture. Above the entryway there is an inscription in German that is also inextricably part of the tableau, a message to the POW chemical weapons techs: "It is better to use your head than to lose it."

Here is all this narrative creeping across the horizon of form. How can we not relate the art to the war that defined Judd's generation and set up the Cold War, which sent Judd to Korea via a cross-country trip with a stop in Marfa?

Judd had strong ideas about the importance of setting for his art: "Frequently as much thought has gone into the placement of a piece as into the piece itself." And so I look. The windows! Hundreds of frames bring in the light of the Marfa Plain, which is anything but a plain form: a landscape sculpted by cultural memory and the modes of production that have exploited it—ranching, drugs, oil, Mexicans, Hollywood.

Outside, mesquite and hard earth. The sprawling complex, set amid the immensity of the Marfa Plain, summons the idea of owning the vastness: Judd, the mad emperor of the rectangles filled with the soul-stirring vistas of the Chihuahuan Desert, the beauty that lured him and would become the object of desire of the kind of money Judd became worth only in death. (Christie's auctioned thirty-six of his sculptures for \$20 million in 2006.)

As the tour winds down, a white Chevy pickup truck pulls up outside the Arena, another massive tin-roofed building, formerly an indoor rodeo at Fort D. A. Russell. A Mexican landscaper jumps out of the cab and pulls an industrial-sized weed whacker from the pickup's bed.

"Thank you for visiting the Chinati Foundation," Chris shouts above the sudden noise as the Mexican tames the weeds. The great whir and whine of the machine reverberates wildly inside the cavernous Arena, which now buzzes like a billion bees.

The local boom began with the arrival of people like John F. "Jeff" Fort III, the former CEO of Tyco Industries. Yes, that Tyco Industries, whose onetime CEO Dennis Kozlowski was at the heart of the first wave of executive pay scandals, in the early 2000s. Kozlowski is serving a prison sentence of up to twenty-five years on convictions of grand larceny, conspiracy, violation of business law, and falsifying records. But Fort had nothing to do with any of that; he'd retired long before the scandal broke. If anything, he stood for the old-school patrician style of wealth antithetical to the Gordon Gekkos of the New Gilded Age.

Fort was married to Marion Barthelme, widow of the famed fiction writer Donald Barthelme and a writer in her own right. She was also a major patron of the arts in Houston, where I teach during the early years of the Iraq War, which is just when we are ramping up the boom. In Houston my story glancingly intersects with Judd's. The Menil Foundation—established by the parents of Philippa de Menil, who headed the Dia Art Foundation, which initially bought the old army base in Marfa for Judd—is an early supporter of the University of Houston's creative writing program. I rent a house once owned by the Menil Foundation.

I meet Jeff at a Houston fundraiser, and we get to talking about northern New Mexico—Jeff and Marion have another house in Santa Fe—and then he mentions Marfa. I tell him I am interested in visiting, and he extends an invitation for me to see his spread, which, with its several properties, comprises a quarter of a million or so acres of land. The next time we're both in New Mexico, he says, we will fly to Marfa by plane, his private plane.

When I meet him at Million Air, a private airstrip outside Santa Fe, Jeff is wearing a white shirt with light blue stripes and pearl buttons. In his lap he holds his cowboy hat, of tightly wound pale yellow straw, ringed by a leather band encrusted with half a dozen five-pointed stars. He has thin brown hair and brown eyes and a long face, both plain and plaintive. Well into his sixties, he stands about five foot nine, has a fair amount of

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hair on his chest, and, as I will soon discover, is in excellent physical shape.

The plane is a Beechcraft Beechjet 400. Beige suede walls, gray leather seats, brass cup holders on the armrests. There are four seats in the main cabin, plus a jump seat in the bathroom and the seats for the pilot and copilot, who are hired hands.

Jeff did not start out as a cowboy. He appears to have had the perfect launching pad of a family. His father was a Manhattan lawyer who moved the family to what was then a rural suburb outside of Washington, D.C. It was a segregated area, Jeff says, and he has childhood memories of walking by a black Baptist church. He never went in, of course. “But my God,” he says, “the sound coming from in there!”

He graduated from Princeton and was granted a deferment from the military when he enrolled in grad school at MIT. In the early 1960s he began working for a communications cable firm called Simplex that held military contracts in Southeast Asia—a lucrative market back in those days of the buildup to full-scale American intervention. So instead of going to Vietnam in a grunt platoon, because of his smarts and connections, he got a job laying cable far from the war zone. Returning to the States, he took the helm at Simplex, a wunderkind. A few years later, the industrial giant Tyco acquired Simplex, and then Jeff topped Tyco. During his tenure, the company became a vast multinational through a dizzying run of acquisitions.

He retired at the age of fifty-one in 1992, breaking away from a life he says was killing him. He quit smoking. He got in shape. He started climbing mountains, tall ones, all over the world.

In 2002 the Kozlowski scandal broke at Tyco, and it nearly sank the company. Stock and morale plummeted. A corporation, a brand, a tradition—and the



Highland Avenue, Marfa, Texas, and the 1886 Presidio County Courthouse. Photo by Paul Hester.

livelihood of thousands of families—all of that was on the brink. The board asked Jeff to return. He righted the ship even as Tyco and Kozlowski continued, for the next several years, to remain in business news headlines and became enshrined as a symbol of corporate cupidity. (Kozlowski spent \$6,000 on shower curtains and \$1 million on a birthday party in Sardinia for his wife; in all, he stole \$400 million from the company and the shareholders.)

“The CEOs these days!” says Jeff. “The ones who take those crazy bonuses—I don’t understand them.” In 2007, Tyco claimed nearly \$19 billion in revenue. Jeff remains an adviser.

He arrived in Marfa in the early 1990s, and the landscape seduced him immediately. “I walked

around for a couple of days,” he says, “and my jaw dropped.”

On one trip Jeff noticed a place for sale, which turned out to be a piece of Judd’s property. He and his wife, Marion, were friendly with Tim Crowley and Lynn Goode, fellow Houston sophisticates; they also happened to be looking for rural property in Texas, and Jeff told them to come to Marfa. At least that is Jeff’s version of the genealogy; most published accounts credit Crowley and Goode with the founding of the new colony. Jeff is largely absent from the recent journalism on Marfa, which is curious given that he became, in a matter of a few years, one of the biggest landholders in West Texas.

After Judd’s place, Jeff bought another parcel



# ONE'S HOUSE IS MORE VANTAGE POINT THAN QUARTERS.

A storm seen from the Crowley House.

Photo by Carlos Jiménez.

up by Fort Davis, and then a house in town. Crowley and Goode also went on a shopping spree, purchasing a good portion of downtown Marfa as well as rural property. Then Jeff bought the legendary Chinati Hot Springs, which Judd had previously owned and had closed off to the public for the first time in recorded history, causing tremendous ill will among locals and countless regular visitors.

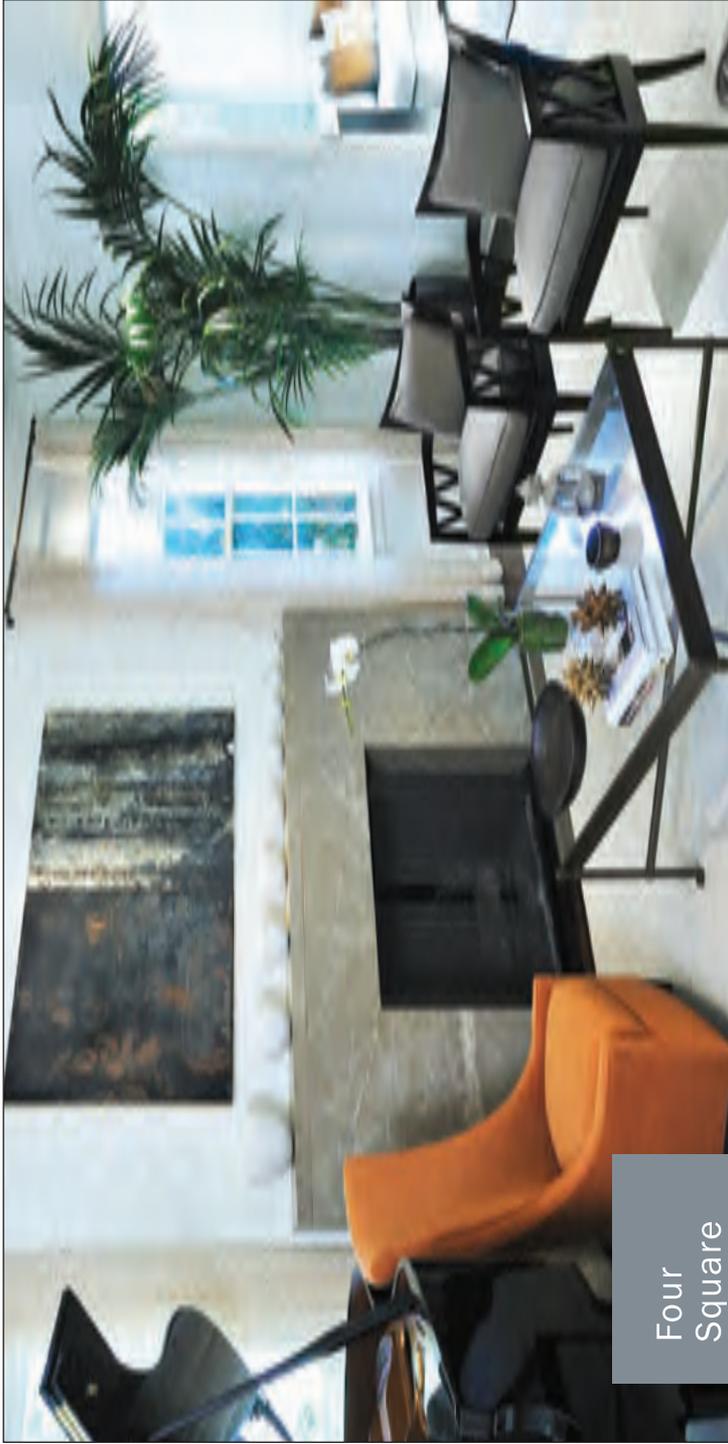
We arrive at the springs and ponder the hubris of the artist who fenced them off. Jeff opened them back up to the public, spruced the place up a bit. The handful of guest rooms and barely rustic pools make up the most modest resort in the area. Camping is \$15 a night,

including use of the springs; the cheapest room is \$75. A communal kitchen is available; everyone packs in and prepares their own food.

Now that the boss has arrived, there is a whirl of activity. A big Western meal is prepared for the tired travelers: chicken and beef fajitas, flour tortillas, fire-roasted chipotle salsa (bottled, from Dallas), and a thick pineapple upside-down cake for dessert. All cooked up by Dave and Krissy Sines, an art couple from Dallas who recently made the trip west themselves. There are no stores or restaurants for dozens of miles.

It is drizzling at dawn, the remnants of an overnight monsoon downpour, and water drips from the eaves of the old adobe of the inn. Sparkling beads hang from the tips of the tamarisk needles.

Jeff needed a West Texas native to teach him about the land he now owned and found the perfect mentor in Jason Sullivan. In his thirties, Jason is a cowboy's cow-



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boy, tall and lanky. He wears a dark brown suede hat with the rim curled tight and high, a long-sleeved blue denim shirt, and Wranglers, with a pistol in a leather holster on his right hip. Jason starts up the “quad,” a Polaris Ranger high-end ATV with massive shock absorbers. There are two seats in front and a crash bar that a third person can hang on to standing up in the back, which is what I eagerly volunteer to do, to no complaint from Jason or Jeff.

The road leading out of the canyon where the spring is hidden heads west for a few miles, leaning down toward the bottomland, where the river has been cutting the canyon for millennia, before hitting another road, which will take us north and deep into Jeff’s parcel. Jason steps on the gas and soon we’re flying down the pebbly path at thirty, maybe thirty-five miles an hour. Rain slaps my face, a cool, sweet sting.

I look toward Mexico. Dim flashes of lightning. Several layers of gun-gray clouds swirl along the stratified mesa-mountains. One lone low cloud, foglike, hangs over the Rio Grande.

The rain comes harder, just as the sun breaks through a bank of clouds in the east. Sunrise comes in a sudden silver flash that illuminates the mesas. A rainbow erupts, a wide band of yellow rising from the pot of gold in Mexico. The arc hurls itself across the zenith and into American sky. Now another rainbow comes, concentric, slightly less brilliant, an echo to the first.

Just like Jeff’s, my jaw drops. We are out all day on the land, along the dirt roads and off them, covering dozens of miles. There are dome hills and spires and rocky rims. For most of the day, everything we can see, unto the horizon, belongs to Jeff.

We are out “messaging around,” as Jeff puts it, which amounts to looking.

We arrive at one of the casitas the artist once used. Rustic minimalism, modest touches of cowboy, Mexican. Jeff delights in telling Judd stories, the kind of lore writers and artists of a certain school spin around themselves consciously or not and that ultimately sell more books or paintings. This type of character we can call “artist as loud,” though some would insist on “artist as free spirit.” One story has Judd, bottle in hand, stripping his models like the photographer in Antonioni’s

*Blowup*. Others cast Judd in a demonic light, appropriate to the devil mythology in nearby Ojinaga across the border, where the Evil One is said to be holed up in a mountain cave. Legend has it that when they tried to dig Judd’s grave on this very ranch, at a site with an arduous view of the land’s decline into the riverbed, the ground was impossibly rocky and the workers needed heavy tools to break it. The Mexicans said (in a romantic variant of the lore) that this was because the earth itself did not want the likes of Judd. Still another tale is about the dirt of his burial mound sinking because, apparently, his casket had imploded. (Maybe the Devil himself pulled Judd down to the only place hotter than the Chihuahuan Desert.)

Few people get access to this particular Judd site (he owned three large holdings in the region). It’s not that Jeff doesn’t want to show it to the world; it’s the sheer inaccessibility of the place. Pinto Canyon itself is no road for old men, but the path up from the springs is barbaric, fit only for a Polaris and guys like Jeff with guides like Jason.

Here, too, Judd made art. With dark volcanic rocks the size of shoe boxes, fitted perfectly to one another and forming—what else?—rectangles. Stone walls of rectangles. Because of the scale and the technical difficulty of his projects, Judd almost always worked with assistants. A man named Jesús Vizcaino helped him build the walls. As for the setting—oh, the land! We have scaled a rocky promontory with a fantastic view of the rolls and folds and domes and crags and strata, the vicious flora somehow attached to it all, the perfectly spaced cumuli glaring white in a hard blue sky. Look up toward the rim, look down to the river. Where land and sky meet is the most painful edge. There is no relation whatever between them, their border utterly fixed, their difference absolute.

The biggest of Judd’s structures here forms a corral—that is, a simulacrum of one, with ornamental touches like arches and even a faux trough. I am more moved by this piece than any box I’ve seen at the Chinati Foundation. Here, the rectangles look human. Out here, where no one can see him, Judd is no mid-twentieth-century American modernist messiah. He’s just the guy who raised up these pretty walls of stone and was ultimately swallowed by the unyielding earth they sprang from.

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MODELS LIKE THE  
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This low-slung house designed by Carlos Jiménez (2000-2004) for Tim Crowley and Lynn Goode stands apart from the landscape without overwhelming it. Windows, courtyards, and patios frame the land.

Jeff calls on his old friend Lynn Goode at her house on the outskirts of town.

It is the only house I've ever visited that has a two-mile driveway between front gate and front door, a straight-arrow road where Tim Crowley occasionally lands his plane.

The house was designed by Carlos Jiménez, a renowned Rice School of Architecture professor. The house establishes itself with long, low-slung rectangles that seem as if they're partially submerged in or emerging from the Marfa Plain. The exterior is a chalky Mediterranean white trimmed with tile speckled like quail eggs. Judd himself could have placed the magnificent windows with their dramatic angles and views.

Lynn is young in the way of the new middle age, blond and tan and fit. She ran a successful art gal-

A public radio station. Far West Texas was the last NPR "black hole" in the Lower 48. And haute cuisine, for the foodies. Forthwith Maiya's, with its fenel tartlets and petits plats de fromage.

And millionaires. Crowley and Goode had friends, and they invited them over and said you should buy and they did.

All this happened in roughly a decade, during which time an old adobe in town that might have sold for \$30,000 in 1994, the year of Judd's death, commanded \$300,000 in 2005, the year *The New York Times* became the town's biggest booster.

Lynn and Jeff greet each other warmly, like the old friends they are.

The first stop is the kitchen, with its immense island, upon which are strewn the many wine openers Lynn has tried (including one that looks like an inter-

galactic weapon), without success, to open a red with. Van Morrison is on the stereo with "Did Ye Get Healed," a number with a bright, bouncy horn riff doubled by female backup singers that is instantly recognizable and an excellent accompaniment to the art, the wine, the sophisticated company.

I am alone on a long sofa that could seat ten, and still I have to move several throw pillows to get comfortable. The living room is a huge vault of a space drawn toward the picture window, which is divided by muntins into horizontal thirds, the top and bottom panels further divided into vertical thirds. The middle frame is the largest and produces a colossal Western view. This is what money does in Marfa: it sets you up to view the land in high-def, in 3-D, in vistas that would have made John Ford's jaw drop. A fantastic amount of money met a fantastic amount of space, and framed it. One's house is more vantage point than living quarters.

I am drunk. I was going to allow myself one glass. That was three glasses ago. Or was it four?

Lynn asks me where I live, and I give her a complicated answer: teaching in Houston part of the year, commuting from northern New Mexico, I'm from Los Angeles, worked a lot on the border in southern Arizona, over the last decade spent a lot of time in Joshua Tree . . .

"Joshua Tree!" Lynn exclaims. "The next Marfa! And Marfa," she says, "is the next South Beach."

I ramble on: I spent a lot of my twenties in Central America, writing about the wars. I was inspired by liberation theology, you know, the priests who married Catholicism and Marxism . . . A dim self-awareness arrives: I've just used the M-word. But maybe that is precisely what my hosts want of me: to show them the margins, bring them a whiff of the authentic life out there on the far plain where

## WHAT DOES A MAN WHO OWNS A GOOD PART OF FAR WEST TEXAS DO WITH IT? HE LOOKS AT IT.

lery in Houston before moving to Marfa with Tim. Diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, she came to the desert, as so many of us did, thinking of it as a place of healing.

But the couple did not come out here to hide. They began remaking the town center. Lynn's Marfa Book Company stocked coffee-table editions of art and architecture, a smattering of serious fiction and poetry, and a strong section on scholarship about the Big Bend region; WWDJD bumper stickers were for sale next to the cash register. Another major rehab project in downtown Marfa transformed an old feed store into the Goode Crowley Theater, a space for avant-garde performances.

What else did Marfa need?

Jeff lends a hand.

Since my hepatitis C diagnosis, I have spent a lot of mental energy trying to negotiate my way out of quitting alcohol, accepting anecdotal, nonprofessional advice that says cutting down is good enough. I can no longer drink without thinking about drinking, but I still drink.

The red Jeff opens is good.

Glasses in hand, we head to the living room, passing back through the entry, where a skylight focuses the last of the day's light on a mini-exhibit curated by Lynn, including a word sculpture by Jack Pierson (four letters, of different fonts and sizes, spelling "fate").

the water jugs run empty, touch some troubled place in their consciences.

And just what is it that I want from them? To stick, as the late Texas governor Ann Richards said all those years ago of Bush senior, their silver feet in their mouths? Reveal their inner racists? Confess their business crimes? Become my literary patrons? Maybe I just want them to want me, in the way I've felt desired by white liberals most of my life.

Lynn breaks in.

"Let's talk about movies!" she says, and she mentions that she hosted the Coen brothers while they were shooting *No Country*. "The older one was creepy. The younger one is okay." And she also caught sight of Daniel Day-Lewis in sweats, jogging around the town, muttering to himself in character, preparing for scenes in *There Will Be Blood*.

I ask if anyone saw *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, which was also shot in the area.

"It was a bit of a mess," Lynn says. "But I liked it because of the landscapes."

Yes, it does begin with the landscape of Far West Texas. But the film is about a body upon the land. Tommy Lee Jones's American ranch hand Pete is best friends with his homologue from Mexico, Melquiades Estrada. Most of their relationship is played against Old Western type—tenderly, including tears, edging up to homoeroticism, very New Western. Fate places Julio Cedillo's warm Mexican cowboy, Melquiades, and Barry Pepper's icy, alienated Border Patrol agent together at the wrong place and time, resulting in Melquiades's death. Tommy seeks justice for his friend from the town sheriff (played as an oaf by Dwight Yoakam), but there is none to be had. So Pete kidnaps the patrolman and forces him to dig up Melquiades from a potter's field grave and haul him back to his old pueblo across the border. Most of the

film has the two riding burros across the borderlands and ultimately deep into Mexico, Melquiades's body steadily decomposing along the way, recalling Sam Peckinpah's exquisitely morbid *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*. Melquiades's fetid corpse symbolically carries the thousands of migrants who've died in the deserts. It is a work of fiction with a strong historical core: the killing of Esequiel Hernández, an eighteen-year-old native of Redford, a small town south of Marfa on the Rio Grande, who was out herding his family's goats and got caught in the crosshairs of a Marine patrol unit on reconnaissance for drug smugglers.

I am not quite drunk enough to make a scene, but in my head I'm pointing at the center of the dinner table and shouting, "Don't you see the body?! It's Melquiades, you decadent bourgeois! Don't you smell him? And the stench of thousands of bodies more, the border dead, deaths in which you are all complicit!"

Soon enough I'm enjoying dessert, a classy whipped ricotta dribbled with honey. For the first time I become aware of the darkness in the living room windows. There is not a single light out on the plain. Now the frame is like one of Mark Rothko's black canvases hanging in the famous chapel in Houston. A picture of nothing. Or of everything you are haunted by or long for. As we leave, it is storming outside. The monsoon. In El Paso they are evacuating flood-prone areas along the river. The Rio Grande is about to crest the levees.

My writer friend, Denise Chávez, says I absolutely must meet with her cousin Enrique, who lives about an hour's drive from Marfa. He is a living encyclopedia of border history, "*muy especial*." Over the phone she says that he likes sweets. "Bring him something *dulce*."

**THIS IS WHAT MONEY DOES IN MARFA: IT SETS YOU UP TO VIEW THE LAND IN HIGH-DEF, IN 3-D, IN VISTAS THAT WOULD HAVE MADE JOHN FORD'S JAW DROP.**



## SHADE HOUSE DEVELOPMENT

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Enrique Madrid lives in Redford, Texas, amid a massive collection of books about the border and beyond. Photo by Angela Garcia.

I pick up a dozen sweet rolls, the kind with heavy icing and a list of unpronounceable ingredients. From Marfa I take Highway 67 through the ghost-mining town of Shafter, to Presidio, on the Rio Grande. The road begins on the high, grassy plain and plummets a few thousand feet to the valley floor. There are only a handful of villages in the area. Presidio County, which includes Marfa, comprises 3,855 square miles and has a population of barely seven thousand people. It is also one of the poorest counties in the United States. That poverty is largely invisible, lost in the immensity of both the land and the Western mind that imagines it. The county seat of Presidio is a small American border town, and like all such towns it is filled with Mexicans—about 95 percent of the population.

The lowlands hugging the river are an inferno compared to Marfa's temperateness—*"tierra caliente,"* as they say in Spanish—and the river helps create the perfect storm of heat, humidity, and mosquitoes. The grasses of the plains give way to the spiny reeds of the ocotillo and tall stalks of sotol. The draws that drain the higher country give the impression that the land is being sucked down into the river valley, as if a hand is pulling a sheet off a bed, down toward the floor.

This is Enrique's country: Redford, Texas, population 136.

Enrique is home when I arrive. He almost always is. When he's not, he's at the post office—he is the town's postmaster—just a few dozen yards away. He lives on the main road, in a house whose rooms would feel spacious if the space weren't taken up with Enrique's collection. Almost every wall is lined with bookshelves, sometimes two deep, floor to ceiling, every inch filled with books and magazines and photocopied articles.

He receives the tray of sweet rolls with a smile. He invites me to sit, and I wait for him to carve out a space on the sofa, which is also piled high with books and papers. The dogs sniff my shoes. A cat leaps onto the sofa through a hole in a window screen.

Enrique wears a red guayabera detailed in white, probably the least common color scheme in the guayabera genre. Reading glasses hang from a chain around his neck. He has a full head of hair beginning to gray; a band of thick strands slices across his forehead and bushy eyebrows.

There is not much time for small talk—or for my questions, for that matter. The presentation, the performance begins.

He drops a book in my lap: *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978–1992: Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home*, by Timothy J. Dunn. The book is open to a particular page, and Enrique points out a paragraph. He reads part of it out loud, from memory and verbatim, as I read along:

The image of the U.S.-Mexico border region that emerges from . . . alarmist portrayals is that of a vulnerable zone in urgent need of numerous, serious security measures, to repel an “invasion” of “illegal aliens,” to win the War on Drugs, and even to counter the threat of terrorism. Complex international issues such as undocumented immigration and illegal drug trafficking were reduced to one-sided, domestic border control problems and framed as actual or potential threats to national security, which in turn required strong law enforcement, or even military responses.

Before I can go further, on top of the open book he places a clipping from the *Denver Post*, October

13, 1991. It is an article about the war on drugs, the theater of which is imagined to be on the border (out in the desert, where Cormac McCarthy conjures his darkness, where Mexicans slither across the sand at night) rather than in the typical American living room where the drugs are consumed. As I read, Enrique quotes, again verbatim, one Michael Lappe, a U.S. Customs officer, who says that Redford, Texas, is “the drug capital of the Southwest.”

On top of the *Post*, Enrique places a copy of the *Big Bend Sentinel*, the paper of record in Far West Texas. The lead article details the killing of Esequiel Hernández by U.S. Marines on patrol with a unit called Joint Task Force 6, charged with drug interdiction efforts on the border, near Hernández’s house in Redford; this is the event that *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* is based upon. The tragedy occurred in the wake of a key point of escalation of the war on drugs ordered by President George H. W. Bush.

Now an issue of *National Geographic* is added to the pile in my lap. The writer, a man named Richard Conniff (who on another assignment swims with piranhas in the Amazon), gets himself and us close to the danger at hand. In a helicopter flyover of the region he describes how the people of this fallen corner of the world live. Enrique recites: “The homes looked like a scattering of rotten teeth in a damaged old mouth.”

He repeats the phrase three times.

“So,” Enrique asks, his voice rising, his mouth dry, “what kind of people live on the border? Cavity people? Pus people? What do you do with rotten teeth? You pull them out and destroy them.”

There are indeed rotten teeth on the border, Enrique says, but they are not the subject of Conniff’s article. Who could be more rotten than former Presidio

County sheriff Rick Thompson, who was caught hiding tons of cocaine in a horse trailer on the Presidio County Fairgrounds? The Marines who trained for the assignment that resulted in Hernández’s killing were given the same imagery and ideas as the magazine’s readers, to justify their operation on the border. Not only were they told that Redford was the “drug capital of the Southwest,” they were also informed that 75 percent of Redford residents were involved in drug trafficking.

“Seventy-five percent,” Enrique repeats. “One hundred people live in Redford. That means that seventy-five of us are drug smugglers.”

Off a shelf comes a General Accounting Office report on the border region, a profile of the place and its people. Enrique recites as I read, an eerie echo: “1/4 of the population on the U.S. side lives in poverty. Along the line in Texas, 35 percent live in poverty.” Nearly half of children and seniors live in poverty. In Redford, the per capita annual income is \$3,577, with over 80 percent of the population living under the poverty line.

“If seventy-five percent of us are drug smugglers,” Enrique says, “we better get in another line of business.”

The Marines that killed Esequiel Hernández were not in Europe or in Vietnam or in Iraq, or in Mexico with General John Pershing’s Mexican expedition, Enrique says.

Esequiel Hernández was American. His death was the first instance since Kent State in which American military personnel killed an American on American soil.

Esequiel Hernández was herding the family’s goats on a bluff above the river. He carried his .22 with him—of World War I vintage, a single-shot rifle.

Unbeknownst to him—indeed, to all of the residents of Redford—a four-man Marine unit was on reconnaissance duty in the area. They were dressed in Special Operations Reconnaissance ghillie suits.

“This is what they looked like,” Enrique says, handing me the G.I. Joe version, still in the box with the clear plastic window. The doll went on sale four months before the Marines arrived in Redford. The Hasbro Corporation had composed the following pitch for its new line: “The U.S. Marine Corps Sniper must be a superb marksman and a master at field craft and aggressive tactics. Outfitted in a ghillie suit, this G.I. Joe soldier carries a Remington 7.62MM M40A1 sniping rifle, and a Colt arms assault rifle. He also comes with binoculars to spot his target.”

Esequiel was standing by an old dry well, the goats nearby. On the bluff he was within sight of his family’s home. Nobody knows exactly what Esequiel Hernández saw in the minutes before he was hit with a single round from Corporal Clemente Banuelos’s rifle. Maybe movement in the matorrales. A bushy thing amid bushes. One green against another.

Or worse: a hulking, stringy Medusa. It was 1997, and the chupacabras was center stage in the folklore of the moment.

The Marines were two hundred yards away, a distance that remained constant until just before the fatal shot was fired, when the Marines closed the gap to 140 yards.

The Marines did not see a human form, either. They saw a drug smuggler, because they’d been told that 75 percent of Redford residents were drug smugglers and that Redford was the drug capital of the Southwest.

Esequiel fired his rifle once, maybe twice. What direction he fired in later became a point of contention.

Whether he readied to fire a second or third time, as Corporal Banuelos claimed, was also a point of contention. Another man in Banuelos’s unit first testified that he did not see Hernández aim in the direction of the Marines, but he later changed his story and corroborated Banuelos’s version of events.

The autopsy established that Esequiel had his back to the Marines when the fatal shot was fired. Investigators also determined that at no time did he advance on their position. From the moment visual contact was made, he was moving away—almost certainly because he feared whatever it was that was lurking in the matorrales.

The Corps’ own internal investigation found “systemic failures at every level of command.” The Marines never offered Hernández medical aid. Forty minutes elapsed between the shooting and the arrival of a rescue helicopter. The forensic examination established that Hernández would have died of his wounds regardless. But, according to the Marines’ report, that should not have mattered to Banuelos and his men. It was a “basic humanitarian responsibility” to offer aid in such a situation. The report found that the Marines had not been adequately trained to do so.

Corporal Clemente Banuelos was a Mexican-American only four years older than Esequiel Hernández, a young man who had much in common with the man he killed, but on the day they came together on the hard red earth on the bluff above the Rio Grande, neither recognized the other. Esequiel probably saw a monster, and that is certainly what Banuelos saw, manufactured masks obscuring the truth that when he pulled the trigger, Banuelos was shooting at himself.

On another visit, I notice that some of the books and articles Enrique piles on my lap have passages

**“WHAT DO YOU DO WITH YOUR NEIGHBORS?” “YOU TALK TO THEM,” HE SAID, NOW IN A GENTLE VOICE. “YOU LOVE THEM. YOU MARRY THEM. YOU BECOME THEM.”**

highlighted in yellow marker—a concession to his weakening eyesight.

Today we begin with geography.

“The border,” Enrique says, “is two thousand miles long.” And it is much wider than the line that represents it—because of free trade, because of migration, because of the intricate commercial and human relationships between the towns on either side of it. The

border, Enrique says, is a vast realm.

The population of this place—communities on both sides within sixty miles of the line—was 10.5 million in 1997. By 2017, it will have doubled. No border, Enrique says, can remain one given that fundamental demographic fact. “And what do they bring us here in Redford?” Enrique says. “The National Guard. Army Reserve.”

They have returned. This is an unthinkable reversal for Enrique. Largely because of the brilliant activism he and his cohort waged following Esequiel Hernández’s death, all military personnel were pulled off the line. But ten years have passed since then, and it seems that the memory has faded enough for the troops to return with the same justification as before, embellished with post-9/11 paranoia. Six thousand National Guard troops were dispatched to the border as part of Operation Jump Start to offer tactical support—to staff observation posts, install new fencing and vehicle barriers, build new roads and Border Patrol stations. But at several points along the line, they are allowed to carry arms. According to the authorities, the weapons are for self-defense.

“That’s what they said the last time,” Enrique remarks.

Now he is weaving together big historical moments, the Nuremberg Trials, Kent State. Then he looks to passages in the Old Testament that spell out the ethics of hospitality. He thunders and shudders like a fire-and-brimstone preacher. He leans in toward you, gets uncomfortably close; spittle flies from his lips.

“It’s racist blindness!” he shouts.

It is as if he seeks, with the stories, the numbers, the arguments, the lives at stake, to raise the body of Esequiel Hernández, a son of the border, named for

the Old Testament prophet who in a vision saw the Valley of Dry Bones—the place where the dead took on flesh when Ezekiel spoke the Word.

After such an outburst Enrique sits down heavily, with a grunt. He might walk out of the room for a long while, pace the kitchen in the terrible heat, or sit with his head bowed over his hands, his elbows splayed on the table.

He carries the pain of the border in his head.

Another article in my lap. From an essay by Richard Rodriguez: “To placate the nativist flank of his Republican Party, President Bush has promised to brick up the sky. But that will not prevent the coming marriage of Mexico and the United States. South and north of the line, we are becoming a hemispheric people—truly American—in no small part because of illegal immigrants.”

“This is the future,” Enrique says. He believes that 9/11 was just a brief parenthesis in the process of integration. This coming together is more than trade and politics. He hands me a study of border DNA. Literally. Samples were taken from residents of Ojinaga, and the typical resident was determined to be 5 percent African, 3 percent European, and 91 percent Native American.

“This is our genetic history,” Enrique says. “We’re still Indians.”

He is now lobbying for his people—the Jumano Apache—to become a federally recognized Native nation. The name of his tribe is spelled out in branches of mesquite lashed together on the roof of his house.

Enrique veers back and forth from his grand vision of continental integration—so Whitmanesque, so Bolívaesque—to the moment Banuelos pulled the trigger, the negation of integration.

He puts a Bible in my hands, open to Leviticus.

He recites chapter 19, verses 33 and 34, from memory: “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

“You have to be hospitable in a desert culture,” Enrique says.

The millions of words in Enrique’s house on the border, and the connections he tries to make among them all add up to fragmented madness. To a search that ends where it started, to a senseless death in the desert, to a man who has become his library. Yes. And it is also more than that; there is a truth amid the clashing signs. The desert Enrique Madrid lives in is not the Big Empty, not the “spiritual” place of gilded clouds, not cowboys and cacti in silhouette, the desert of the Western or the Travel section or the hip art colony. Enrique’s desert is crammed with history. An emptiness filled to bursting with stories in search of voices, ghosts in search of bodies.

The last time I saw Enrique was at a conference organized by the ReViva Collective. His right leg had been amputated at the knee, the pant leg folded and held in place with paper clips. Diabetes. I remembered Denise Chávez telling me that I should take her cousin Enrique something sweet. For the next two and a half hours he wheeled himself around the table, picking up texts, reading, weaving.

“What do you do with your neighbors?” Enrique asked. “What do you do with your neighbors?” he asked again. And once more, shouting: “What do you do with your neighbors?” “You talk to them,” he said, now in a gentle voice. “You love them. You marry them. You become them.” C

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“BETWEEN THE TWO STRETCHES OF GRAND PARKWAY SEGMENT E, AT THE CENTER OF THE GAP, WAS THE EXCAVATION OF HUMAN REMAINS. THOUGH DESIGNATED AN ‘AREA OF INTEREST’ AND ELIGIBLE FOR INCLUSION IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES SINCE 1996 BECAUSE SPEAR POINTS HAD BEEN FOUND THERE, IT APPEARED AS IF TXDOT HAD AIMED THE 15-MILE-LONG HIGHWAY SEGMENT DIRECTLY AT THE BURIAL GROUND.”

PHOTO BY BRETT SILLERS  
TEXT BY RAJ MANKAD

