

CRITICS' PICKS

Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler

By Grant Johnson – October 26, 2014



In *Giant*, 2014, the highlight of this show and an apt introduction to this duo's recurring interests, two distinct settings and cinematic modes intertwine into one sublime vista. The first, a period piece of Merchant Ivory detail, watches a Warner Bros. secretary circa 1955 as she types out a location contract for the eponymous 1956 film. The second follows Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler and their crew as they fastidiously record the sounds and sights around the now-skeletal remains of the film's Reata mansion in a field outside Marfa, Texas. The technology of the first, the typewriter, contrasts with the silence of the second's boom mics and camera dollies as they turn wind gusts, creaking wood, and perching birds into cinematic moments. Through such novelties, the two views juxtapose the empiricist techniques of documentary to those of the big-budget narrative drama, until the conventions associated with either begin to invert, just as aptly describing one as its other.

"Sound Speed Marker" continues the inquiry that *Giant* refines in two earlier documentary explorations that likewise explore the ways film's past-tense fictions permeate real geographies in the present. *Grand Paris Texas*, 2009, combines video of the decrepit Grand Theater, a long-abandoned movie palace in Paris, Texas, with interviews of locals about their relationship with Paris, Texas, 1984, a big-budget feature that used the town's name but filmed largely in distant Fort Stockton and Marathon, Texas. *Movie Mountain, Méliès*, 2011, highlights various narratives that surround a mountain in the Chihuahuan desert, including a screenwriting cowboy, the descendants of silent film actors, and a possible link to historic filmmaker George Méliès. Well cited at Ballroom, Marfa, just down the road from Donald Judd's utopia, all three films encourage the viewer to consider the specificity of any locality, even when just passing through.