

MARFA ROCKS

Every full moon, a stunning sun-powered music concert and light show electrifies this West Texas desert town.

By Shane Mitchell



Haroon Mirza's stone circle sculpture makes a powerful statement day and night.

In the grasslands outside Marfa, Texas, nine boulders stand like a futuristic Stonehenge, with only a stray jackrabbit to observe them on most days. But once a month, when the full moon rises, art patrons gather around audio installation artist Haroon Mirza's stone circle. Inspired by ancient astronomical megaliths, Mirza used technology to activate this grouping of carved black Mexican marble embedded with energy-efficient LEDs and speakers programmed to emit a movement from his Solar Symphonies series. On concert nights, the "mother stone," fitted with a solar array, powers the lights and music that sounds like a mash-up of heavy-metal feedback distortion and celestial pulses from space.

Mirza's pieces have been shown at the Venice Biennale and the New Museum in New York; however, Ballroom Marfa, an art space that showcases work from artists inspired by Texas's Big Bend region, commissioned this project for its own backyard. Since the '70s, Marfa has made headlines for its large-scale installations by Donald Judd, Claes Oldenburg, and other contemporary sculptors. The area is also known for its wide-open spaces, far removed from the light pollution caused by bigger cities. Nearby Big Bend National Park and Big Bend Ranch State Park have been named International Dark Sky Parks, because the skies above them are among the pitch-blackest in North America. Plus, Marfa is



close to the Rebecca Gale Telescope Park at McDonald Observatory, which hosts Star Party events for gazing at distant constellations. So Mirza's new age sculpture is positioned purposefully, with a spectacular view of the unfiltered cosmos.

"For me, sustainability has been a concern for a long time. My main medium is electricity—so how that electricity is generated is critical," says the London-based artist, who recalls on his first visit how odd it was that he hadn't noticed any solar panels between Marfa and El Paso, considering the abundance of Texas sun. Moved to create art that could last generations, Mirza felt that sustainability should be part of the theme. "Presenting the power of renewable energy is one thing, but working with our closest celestial objects—the sun and the moon—is something humans have done since our species emerged."

The project came together with the help of a happy coincidence. When Austin-based Freedom Solar spotted on Google Earth that Ballroom Marfa was the one building in town equipped with solar panels, the company contacted the gallery in hopes of expanding solar power in the area. It was perfect timing for the curator at Ballroom Marfa, who was in the market for an off-the-grid solar system for Mirza's sculpture. A campaign to promote solar energy was born. Freedom Solar partly sponsored the project and other initiatives, increasing the number of private solar power installations in the region fivefold in one year. The goal of local activists, who go by the name Marfa Solar System, is for the city to be 100 percent powered by renewable energy—no small feat in a region where crude oil has dominated. Meanwhile, even when full-moon viewings aren't scheduled, standing among the silent rocks as the wind tumbles over the darkening mesas of the Davis Mountains is a power trip in itself.

