

AUSTIN COMPANY POWERS MARFA'S AMBITIOUS STONEHENGE ART INSTALLATION

By John Egan – May 23, 2018



stone circle
Photo by Rowdy Dugan

A new art installation that evokes the pre-historic English monument Stonehenge yet incorporates modern technology is energizing the West Texas arts hub of Marfa, the desert town that blessed us with the Prada Marfa “store” and the Marfa Lights phenomenon.

It’s supported by Austin-based Freedom Solar Power, which installed the solar panels that supply power for the sound and light features of the work, titled Stone Circle. Freedom Solar says it donated half of the solar panels outright and chipped in additional money for every new solar customer referred by Ballroom Marfa, the nonprofit arts group that commissioned the work.

Stone Circle debuted at an invitation-only event during the April 29 full moon and will remain on the Marfa landscape for at least five years. You can visit Stone Circle (just north-east of Marfa, near the Marfa Municipal Golf Course) during the normal business hours for Ballroom Marfa, as well as on the evening of

each full moon.

Ballroom Marfa calls Stone Circle its most ambitious public installation since Prada Marfa was finished in 2005. As described in a release from Ballroom Marfa, Stone Circle features black marble boulders that emit patterns of sound and light from energy generated by the solar panels.

Eight stones are situated in a circle — hence the name — and are equipped with speakers and LED lights. The 22,000-pound ninth stone, known as the “mother” stone, stands outside the circle. The solar panels on the ninth stone charge batteries that power a 40-minute, sound-and-light symphony activated during each full moon.

Bret Biggart, CEO of Freedom Solar, describes the 1.3-kilowatt system that his company set up for Stone Circle as “one of the most unique projects we’ve ever done.”



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Photo by Rowdy Dugan

“The installation blurs the line between ancient mysticism and contemporary technology, and it’s extraordinary that the solar power harnessed from the sun is stored until it’s activated by the moon,” Biggart tells CultureMap. “Photographs don’t do it justice. It’s really something you have to experience for yourself.”

Ballroom Marfa says it’s collaborating with British artist Haroon Mirza, the creator of Stone Circle, to produce a series of dance, music, and performance events where “artists will engage with and interpret the sculpture.”

“This includes reprogramming the stones with a series of commissioned full-moon compositions that will change the sculpture’s sonic presence over time,” Ballroom Marfa says.

Mirza couldn’t be reached for comment.

According to Wired magazine, Mirza says that “the layout of the stones was inspired by a 4,000-year-old site in Derbyshire, England, known as the Nine Ladies. There, if local legend is to be believed, nine women were turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath.”

“It’s neo-Neolithic,” Mirza told Wired. “The idea of it is at least 50,000 years old. But the technology here is very contemporary, and almost, for this area, futuristic.”

Adriana Farietta, an advancement consultant at Ballroom Marfa, says the inclusion of solar materials in the art installation has sparked a solar movement in West Texas. The amount of solar power used in the three-county area around Marfa has tripled over the past year, Farietta says, “and that number is continuing to grow rapidly.”

Freedom Solar now operates a regional office in Marfa and is donating a solar energy system to the volunteer fire department in Marfa. Farietta says locals are even battling around the “radical” idea of taking Marfa off the electric grid and depending solely on solar power.

Farietta credits Stone Circle, “a highly conceptual and inherently progressive artwork,” with producing some “very tangible results” for the community.