



United Artists Ltd Marfa

# MARFALAND

I STILL REMEMBER THE DAY a colleague at art school told me about Donald Judd's compound in West Texas. Already being a fan of Judd's work, though not knowing much about him, I had imagined it as my friend told me: that somewhere in the desert, under lock and key, two giant hangar-sized structures were filled with Judd's perfectly austere, milled aluminium objects, and that Judd himself would visit them alone to commune with them, fantastic. I decided right then and there that I would have to see these things for myself one day. Last year I finally had the opportunity to join the ranks of Judd pilgrims when I went to Marfa for the opening of an exhibition by the artists Elmgreen & Dragset. Among the many wonderful discoveries I made during my time there, one of the more bizarre ones, was the real estate feeding frenzy underway in both the one-horse town of Marfa (population 2,500) and the surrounding counties – well, at least rumours of one

Artistic oasis or real estate opportunity?  
**Adam E Mendelsohn**  
reports



anyway. During my brief visit, it was hard to avoid talk along the lines of 'That one bedroom shack that was \$20,000 a few years ago is on the market for \$200,000 now' or 'People in Manhattan and LA are snapping up properties sight unseen!' Not vast sums of money compared to east or west coast real estate prices, but certainly worth paying attention to, given the context.

Being an amateur student of real estate, at some point I suppose you'd have to pay attention to the evidence that, when artists occupy depreciated or unwanted property, money often follows. Today, some of the most expensive real-estate in Manhattan can be found in SoHo and Tribeca. During the late 60s however, these neighbourhoods were neglected slums where artists could afford to pay the dirt-cheap rents. Judd, for example, was an early pioneer of SoHo where in 1968 he bought a classic five-storey building at 101 Spring St for \$68,000. In London, areas such as Hackney and Shoreditch have developed along similar lines (see AM246). Not so long ago even blue chip real-estate markets like the Hamptons were inexpensive alternatives for artists who couldn't afford to summer in more fashionable locations. And then there are the Guggenheim Billaos of the world: Frank Gehry's museum was so successful, that developers and urban planners the world over (who refer to the phenomenon as the 'Bilbao effect') use it as a model for revitalising economically depressed, metropolitan communities. Like it or not, history will tell you that art and artists attract people, who in turn attract business.

Marfa Texas, home to Judd's sprawling museum, is a speck of a town in the middle of nowhere. So it's a little difficult to entertain the notion that creative people from all over the place are moving there just so they can exist within close proximity to the art. Founded in 1883,

Marfa was little more than a watering stop on the railroad route from El Paso to San Antonio. Legend has it that a railroad engineer's wife named it after a character from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky. Originally known as Tank Town, some 60 miles from the Mexican border, it is set on a plateau a mile above sea level and ringed by mountain ranges. As early as 1911 the US government sent soldiers to Marfa in response to the Mexican uprising. Eventually this outpost, little more than barracks and artillery sheds, became Ft. DA Russell. Because the land was so cheap, the site suited his purposes, and because he loved the landscape, Judd bought the entire site in the 70s and transformed it into the Chinati Foundation (named after a nearby mountain range). Judd also went on to buy up half the town, three ranches totalling more than 40,000 acres, and the Kingston Hot Springs near the Rio Grande – which evidently had been used for 200 years by the locals until Judd closed it to the public. It is not entirely clear when Judd officially moved to Marfa, though many people agree that it coincided with the divorce from his wife in 1976. During the years preceding his move, Judd had refined his enormously influential concepts about integrating art with the space around it: 'that the building be useful for living and working and more importantly, more definitely, be a space in which to install work of mine and others'. At some point around the time of his divorce it became clear to Judd that what he had created at his building in SoHo was a blueprint for a larger scale project that required more space. He had also become disenchanted with the New York art world and the constraints of the commercial gallery system describing it as a 'harsh and glib situation'. And perhaps more than anything, Judd was irritated by the distractions of life as a famous artist.

Many people who have moved to Marfa recently and who are responsible for the buzzy type of attention it has been getting, did so partly for the same reasons Judd did and partly not. The town itself is charming enough, has a pinkish, second empire style courthouse in the middle, a bunch of new contemporary art galleries, a world class bookstore, a place called the Brown Recluse where they roast fair trade coffee beans on the premises, a hotel where the cast of the movie *Giant* stayed in the 50s (the film was shot in Valentine up the road), a restaurant, an old wool and mohair factory stocked with John Chamberlain sculptures, and a pizza place appropriately named the Pizza Foundation. All of the renovations are subdued and in keeping with the town's overall aesthetic. The original character of Marfa, architecturally speaking, appears well preserved if not improved. And strolling around town there is always the palpable whiff of authentic Americana. The most persuasive draws, though, are the surrounding geography. The arid, mountainous desert, the wide open spaces, the enormous skies, the alien sunsets that make you understand the Dan Flavin sculptures, the spectacular canopy of stars at night, and the sense of freedom and possibility inextricably wrapped up in romantic ideas about the frontier West. The dramatic contrast to urban environments is attractive. Its inaccessibility (the nearest pharmacy is a two-hour drive) shields it, at least for the time being, from the rest of homogenised America – the Wal-Marts and the Starbucks.

The recent migration of people to Marfa is typified by Nick Perry and his wife, both painters, who moved from New York three years ago. 'We first came here to

>> Marfa Texas, home to Judd's sprawling museum, is a speck of a town in the middle of nowhere. So it's a little difficult to entertain the notion that creative people from all over the place are moving there just so they can exist within close proximity to the art.

see the collection and really loved the town.' Perry, who works at the Chinati Foundation as coordinator for education, says that they both wanted a larger place to live and work, but that the realities of being artists in NY meant not being able to foster those type of dreams. When asked if the town has suffered under the current media scrutiny responsible for labelling Marfa 'The Hamptons of Texas' or 'The Texas Palm Springs', Perry says: 'Towns evolve. Regardless of how much the town expands, barring sky-scrapers marring the view – the collection will always be protected by its literal position in the landscape. A lot of artists have moved here for the landscape alone and could care less about the Chinati Foundation.' Perry also informs me that a recording studio is currently being built, that the town philosophers meet at the Dairy Queen, and that the owners of the restaurant Maya's have built a loft-style Montessori school for the new generation of kids growing up in Marfa.



Elmgreen & Dragset  
Prada Marfa 2005



>> Some of the hardcore Judd fans hold that Judd would be disgusted by what is happening and wouldn't want anything to do with Marfa and its so-called Marfadites.

Boyd Elder, artist, long-time collaborator with rock band The Eagles, and sometime resident of Marfa actually moved there before Judd did. 'When I heard Don was moving here it was exciting. Our kids were about the same age, and I was looking forward to having someone around I could talk about art with. Of course, we never talked about art, just sleazy gallery owners and dealers in Manhattan.' Elder has long-time ties to that part of West Texas, his great-grandfather having done business with local ranchers. When asked if the recent developments pose a threat, Elder says: 'It's not a danger it's an attraction. Ballroom Marfa and the Marfa Book Co have really contributed to the culture and increased its intrigue. Before these kinds of people moved here, the community was depressed. Now it's a whole conglomerate of fascinating characters, because you know, the extremes of living here, it's a far-fetched notion. I believe that art creates a magnet.'

Ballroom Marfa, a non-profit gallery whose inaugural exhibition was in October 2003, has contributed a lot to the town's evolving identity. Its current show 'You Are Here' features an impressive roster of mainly young, New York artists. Founded by Virginia Leberman and Fairfax Dorn, Ballroom is also a centre for film screenings and music. Having moved to Marfa from Manhattan, Dorn says: 'We thought there was space for more to happen here ... people are getting tired of the financial pressures and social distractions of urban life. I feel lucky to live here.' September of this year sees Ballroom Marfa building a semi-permanent drive-in just west of town where MoMA New York is curating the film programme. United Artists Ltd is also a project space that opened its doors in October 2005. It was created by New York-based artist Michael Phelan after he was invited to show work at Ballroom. Similar in spirit to Andrea Zittel's High Desert Test Sites, UAL 'is structured by a single method: three artists and a writer are invited four times a year to Marfa where they meet, install work, and spend the week under one roof – hanging out, conversing, exchanging ideas, and of course, drinking lots of tequila. The first project included Carol Bove, Adam McEwen and Seth Price. Over the course of the week conversation included Bob Dylan, the Marfa lights, John

Chamberlain's *The Secret Life of Hernando Cortez*, DMT and the elves, Joan Didion, best Neil Young song, worst artists with the best careers, and which artists' work we would like to see under one roof.'

There seems to be a small contingent in town that resents people who are discovering Marfa after them – trespassers on their secret slice of the American dream. Other people display a worshipful reverence for Judd, forgetting that Judd, as magnificent as his Chinati Foundation is, isn't the only visionary either historically or in recent times to have utilised the desert's raw potential. A couple of states over in Arizona for example, there's Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West, James Turrell's Roden Crater, Paolo Soleri's Arcosanti; and Jeff Bezos, the Amazon.com billionaire, has recently bought 239,000 acres of land north of Marfa where he intends to build a spaceport. Artists have been flocking to places like Taos in New Mexico for the light, the beauty, and the lack of consumerist culture for years. Since places like that are now dominated by wealthy retirees, it makes sense for artists with little capital to jump at the opportunity to get in on something before it becomes too expensive for them. Another worry is that Marfa will become 'an artists' colony in a kitschy sort of way – one souvenir shop next to another' in the words of Marianne Stockebrand, former head of the Chinati Foundation and Judd's lover has said. Craig Rember, the collections manager for the Judd Institute, remarked: 'I appreciate the new developments in Marfa and don't really see them ending soon. Every time a new project seems to be the last big thing, something else comes along.' It's true that some of the locals have been squeezed out. The town's biggest employer is border patrol (when Judd first moved there he was the biggest employer), and most of these locals are moving out because they can't afford to park their land yachts in town anymore, although most people who live in Marfa will tell you that a lot of the jacked up property isn't actually selling. Some of the hardcore Judd fans hold that Judd would be disgusted by what is happening and wouldn't want anything to do with Marfa and its so-called Marfadites. It's probably accurate to say that, were Judd alive, he wouldn't live in Marfa, but the glaringly obvious fact remains: Judd opened the Chinati's doors to the public so that people would come and see it. Why would someone draw up a gargantuan will detailing precise instructions on how his residence in Marfa should be left, frozen in time, if not to solicit the attentions of enthusiasts. ■

ADAM E MENDELSON is a writer based in Manhattan.



ANNE HARDY 21 January – 19 February 2006

MAUREEN PALEY 21 Herald Street, London E2 6JT T: 44 (0)20 7729 4112 F: 44 (0)20 7729 4113