



A little take on Marfa's culture clash

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Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - AMERICAN-STATESMAN ARTS WRITER

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None — A pilgrimage to Marfa is a must for any contemporary art aficionado.

The trek to the small high desert West Texas town to visit the Chinati Foundation — the singular art museum conceived from a 340-acre former Army facility by Donald Judd — becomes a qualifying badge of sorts, a way to let others know of one's dedication to and appreciation of Judd's heady vision of a place where as he wrote "contemporary art (can) exist as an example of what the art and its context were meant to be."

The exclusivity of Chinati is undeniable: Marfa is nearly 200 miles from any commercial airport and about 80 miles from an interstate highway. And yet the disconnect between Chinati and its fashionable international visitors, and the longtime Marfa residents, remains profound.

It's that disconnect that fascinates artist and art historian Josh T. Franco. And he pokes and probes those parallel communities in "Marfita," the clever and slightly irreverent installation he's created along with Alison Kuo and Joshua Saunders at Co-Lab Space.

Franco is a third-generation West Texan, the grandson of Mexican American migrant farmworkers who settled in Marfa during the non-farming seasons. Franco spent his childhood in Marfa with family. Marfa started as a town that served the region's ranches. (The 2010 census found that nearly 70 percent of Marfa's population of 1,981 is Latino.)

And yet Franco felt an immense chasm between his family and the art community at Chinati — a chasm that grew deeper as his appreciation of Judd's cerebral theorizing grew.

For "Marfita," Franco and his collaborators juxtapose Judd's rarefied vision along with its resultant exclusivity against another pilgrimage site in Marfa: The home of the late Hector Sanchez, who in 1994 saw an apparition of the Virgin Mary in his backyard. Sanchez lived less than a half mile from Chinati and the shrine he built at his house is still a destination for the faithful. Though they may literally cross paths, the pilgrims headed to the Sanchez shrine and those headed to Chinati never connect and, Franco surmises, have virtually no knowledge of each other.

Here in Austin, Franco recreated in miniature Judd's 100 aluminum boxes that reside in two former artillery sheds at Chinati. Franco's tiny sheds sit on the dried-out lawn in the Co-Lab yard exactly as they sit amidst the desert scrub at Chinati. And surrounding Franco's sheds are miniature versions of the 15 truck-sized concrete works that run along the border fence at Chinati, the first works Judd installed. Franco's concrete works, however, are ordinary cement blocks.

Inside the warehouse at Co-Lab, Saunders offers his recreation of the Sanchez home while a video made by Kuo flickers through footage of the trio's trip to Marfa. Outside, Kuo's oversized version of Sanchez's shrine to the Virgin Mary nestles under a tree, just as it does in Marfa.

Of course, there's an irony in showing "Marfita" at Co-Lab Space. Like Chinati, Co-Lab is accessible by appointment only. But that's because the artist-run space lacks the funding to keep staff for regular viewing hours, not because it wants to control public access as Chinati does. And contrary to Chinati's affluent and pristine presentation, "Marfita" is unmistakably handmade and low-cost.

Likewise, Co-Lab is in a predominantly Latino neighborhood, just as Chinati is. But for the opening of Marfita, Franco and his collaborators enlisted the help of performance artist Natalie Goodnow, who led a procession that drew from ritual of the indigenous cultures of Mexico.

"Marfita" troubles the boundary between two distinct groups that treasure Marfa with the same depth of reverence.

Franco and his cohorts have neatly raised questions, and smartly left it to us to ponder possible answers.

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'Marfita'

When:By appointment through Saturday

Closing reception:7 to 11 p.m. Saturday

Where:Co-Lab Space, 613 Allen St.

Cost: Free

Info:300-8217, www.colabspace.org

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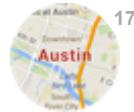
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