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1,000 Miles to Marfa: A Road Trip



Donald Judd, 15 works in concrete, Marfa, Photo Credit F Holzherr, Photo Courtesy of The Chinati Foundation

1,000 Miles to Marfa: A Road Trip

Marfa texas

Written by Cathy Breslaw

Why would anyone drive 1,000 miles to a remote and tiny town in southwestern Texas? Unless you are a contemporary art lover, you'd probably think this road trip a bit crazy. For me, Marfa

Texas has been on my list of destinations for several years. The time seemed right –it was Chinati Weekend – Marfa’s biggest art event of the year – so off we went! Marfa turned out to be so much more than an art destination.

The town, originally set up as a water stop for the railroad, sits on a highland plain, 4,830 feet above sea level surrounded by distant mountains. With giant puffy cloud-filled skies, and land sprinkled with cottonwood trees and desert vegetation, the light at sunrise and sunset casts a warm glow across the plains. Perhaps this is what stirred the imagination of acclaimed minimalist artist Donald Judd who accidentally came upon Marfa on a bus trip to Los Angeles from army basic training. Some years later in 1979, looking for a place to permanently install his art, and to expand upon his art practice, Judd bought land with the help of the DIA foundation which included a decommissioned military base encompassing dozens of buildings. We walked about 3 miles in covering the entire property.

Although Judd passed away in 1994, his legacy remains in the form of a 340 acre Chinati foundation museum and expansive outdoor art exhibition space all of which began in 1987 with the permanent installation of his work and that of his friends and contemporaries –Dan Flavin’s light installations, John Wesley’s paintings, Carl Andre’s poetry and sculptures, Claes Oldenburg’s sculpture, John Chamberlain’s sculptures, Roni Horn’s sculpture, Richard Long’s sculptures, David Robinowitch’s sculptures, Ingólfur Arnarsson’s graphite drawings, Ilia Kabakov’s conceptual installation, and Robert Irwin’s building installation(2016).

The outdoor exhibition spaces of the Chinati museum include Judd’s free-standing works in concrete which occupy several acres of land constructed from twenty-five-centimeter-thick concrete slab works which were poured, fabricated, and assembled on site and serve to ‘frame’ the landscape for visitors encountering them. In addition, two massive sized former artillery sheds are home to Judd’s 100 mill aluminum sculptures. Floor to ceiling windows reflect and integrate outdoor light with the smooth surfaces of his “boxes”. Similarly, Irwin’s building installation (*Untitled*)*Dawn to Dusk* is basically an empty building with long hallways, a set of several high windows and yards of scrim urging visitors to *notice* the light in their awareness and the positioning and quality of it as it changes throughout the day as they move within the space.

The Chinati arts weekend which gets 11,000+ visitors each year was a fun-filled, art-filled experience which included a champagne reception, artist talks, open studios, free access to view all the art on the grounds of the foundation museum as well as other buildings in town. The highlight was the traditional Saturday night free community event to enjoy mariachi, ranch fare and drinks. Fascinating conversations were had with folks from nearby towns, Vancouver BC, Germany, Boston and those far and wide curious about Marfa.

About 25 miles outside of town we came upon a permanent art installation called *Prada Marfa* by artists Elmgreen and Dragset, a public art piece resembling a ‘real-life’ Prada store. Another random installation along the highway were billboard-like advertising pieces in the forms of Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean for the movie *Giant(1956)* which was filmed in Marfa. Also famous are the nearby unexplainable *Marfa Lights* – orbs of light that hover, shift, bounce, and dive reported to be visible about 10-15 nights a year.

There is so much more to Marfa which at first glance could be thought of as a *blink-and-you-might-miss-it* type of place. Instead, it is ground zero for artists, collectors, and tourists with a sense of adventure and an appreciation of the big skies, high plains, peaceful setting, and beautiful light of west Texas. I hope to return one day.

<https://visitmarfa.com/visit>

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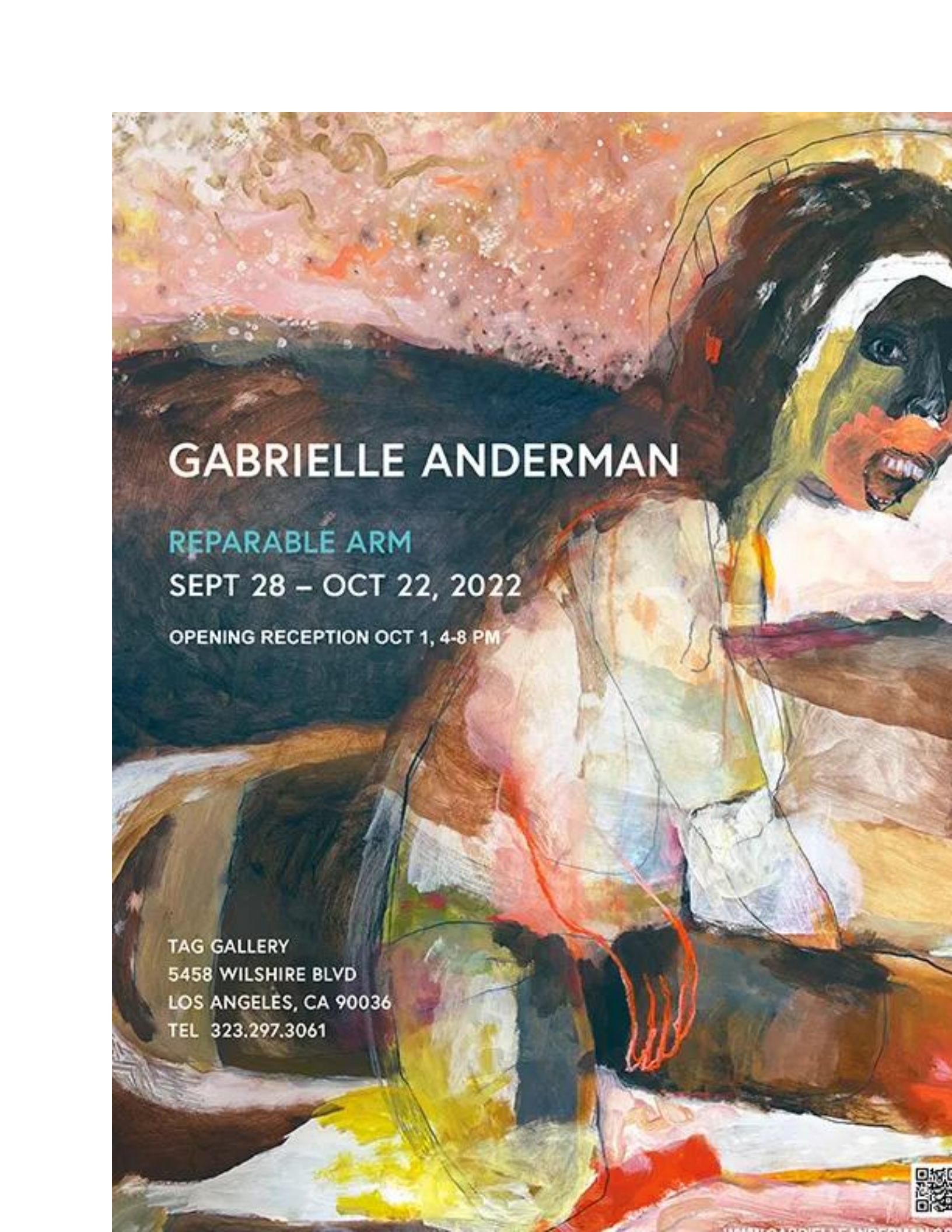
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