

Pondering a few studios of the south

For a long time I've been rooted in the notion that much inspiring work is inseparable from the sphere of home and life, made by artists for whom home = studio, where the boundaries between home, life, and art are irrelevant if not nonexistent. To put it another way, some of the most compelling creative work I've encountered orbits centrifugally around the maker's home place / home life; the mainframe art world is not the gravitational center, nor is the work directed to that world, that audience.

I didn't arrive at this by being disenchanted with the main frame/mainstream. I'm engaged by art that originates from many places including that one, but I continue to have the richest experiences in the places where creative people make work that's more life specific than site specific, at least in the 1970s sense of the phrase.

Having spent the last 25+ years seeking out and visiting artists' environments I've become just a little jaded, occasionally feeling that I've seen, or at least know about the exceptional examples. Jaded is exactly what I don't want to be, so I've had the great good fortune—somewhat out of the blue—to encounter surprising sites at almost every turn, throughout the last year and the beginning of this one.

I just returned from a kind of pilgrimage to southern California, where reinventions of the studio erupt naturally and unexpectedly, as if from the fault line itself. Simon Rodia's Watts Towers, the miracle-incarnate—for what they are and how they endure—are looking better than ever, and the world looks better from and through them. The Towers' radiating influence stretches from its early (post-Rodia) history, as a beacon of hope during the 1965 Watts riots. Noah Purifoy and others established the Watts Towers Art Center as a response to the conditions that caused the riots (all of which profoundly directed his creative life, but more on this in a moment). In case my original point was momentarily lost, the Watts Towers complex grew out of Rodia's home and garden—literally—at 1765 South 107th Street, Los Angeles, between about 1921 and 1954, as an ingenious and original expression of organizing space, architecturally and sculpturally, texturally and colorfully, symbolically and tangibly, operatically and soulfully. It means many things to many people, and was one of the agents that forced the 20th century to reconsider the no-longer-workable definitions of architecture and sculpture as mutually independent. It triggers an archetypal awareness of ground and sky. (I only have

something like 500 words at my disposal, which I intend to stretch, but I couldn't do the Towers justice with any number of words, so please take my sincere advice and visit the site as soon as humanly possible, if you haven't already.)

The pilgrimage went beautifully off track, and from the Watts Towers we were directed to "The 10th Wonder of the World", at 1145 West 62nd Street, a modest neighborhood not too far from the Towers. The world keeps churning out its wonders, and the makers of this one—Lew and Diane Harris—confidently believe theirs to be in the top 10.

You figure there's a house in there somewhere because it's on a street lined with bungalows in a neighborhood filled with houses, in a city, etc. But then you're not quite sure. It takes a few minutes to recognize the peak of the 2nd story gable—the only clue that there is indeed a house in there—since the space where the yard would be is so completely and densely occupied with stuff—big stuff and tons of it—stacked high, robustly arranged, and unified boldly with black, white, and red. Using leverage (the explanation for how they moved colossal sections of iron pipe and other industrial materials to their project), Lew and Diane created a composition of vertical upright cylinders, some topped with spinning industrial fans. There are airy open-work globe forms and curious melted amorphous objects. The whole arrangement is bordered along the sidewalk by a line of clear acrylic fence posts, a delicate touch. Memorials to Michael Jackson abound in Los Angeles, and the single narrative element here is a standing portrait (likely a memorial) to Jackson, incised in a jumbo piece of clear acrylic.

Lew described the process of finding industrial materials—specifically the large steel cylinders—and the metamorphosis that occurs when horizontal cast offs are moved to the new context of their yard and positioned upright. He mentioned the experiential power of color and verticality. He hinted at the purpose of their work: to give objects identity and meaning.

It's easy to miss the narrow, winding path that leads from the sidewalk to the house. It's flanked by tall walls of stuff—paper, rags, you name it—stacked so densely that it's not clear if it's actually navigable. No telling what's in there, or even if the artists go into the house. The street side of the sidewalk seems to be the primary studio/living space, with sheltered seating, storage areas, and a packed-to-the-gills truck that may also be a living

space. We found the artists there, and it appears that they spend much of their time there, working, and hosting the occasional wonder seeker.

The pilgrimage continued about 125 miles east to the high desert near Joshua Tree, to the Noah Purifoy site. (There are various names for it which I don't mention as I'm not certain what the artist called it.) Purifoy (1917 – 2004) moved to the desert from Los Angeles in the mid 1980s and spent the next 20+ years building immeasurably poetic structures and objects throughout his 7 ½ acre open air desert studio. Purifoy worked with cast off things as well—a challenge, in that nearby Joshua Tree recycles just about everything. Knowing this fact gives his inventory of materials the distinct sense of rescue and transformation. I guarantee that you will not find more beguiling sculptures made of cafeteria trays if you search the world over. The constructions are at once an entire site and a collection of many individual tableaux, and one can wander for hours through them, beholding the total of it, as meanings multiply and compound at each setting. Most of the constructions are larger-than-life (taller than us), tenuously held to ground by guy wires. The wind is high and the elements move, shake, and sing under the blasting sun and sky.

Purifoy was engaged in the L.A. art scene for years, and Kienholz associations pop up regularly, as both artists shared a knack for squeezing the life out of (and back into) previously used materials and giving them new form. Purifoy built an homage to Frank Gehry, and other tableaux likely honor other creative people. Purifoy's trailer and surrounding garden are somewhere near the center of the site, and at some point Ed Ruscha built Purifoy a ranch house across the road, perhaps so he could get of the studio, and the sun and wind, now and then.

Being there, the flash of sun glints kaleidoscopically around metal and wood, old clothes and tires, and the wind never ceases. The world closes in on this one place for the moment and you could be a Tibetan monk high in the Himalayas, flags flapping, meditating on a prayer wheel. The experience of wandering the site is exhilarating and a bit haunting. The tableaux are instantly fulfilling—they trigger pleasure and deep thought—and the opportunity to wander through acres of them is a true gift.