

# Notes on Looking

Contemporary Art from Los Angeles

## On the Rocks (by Nathan Danilowicz)

Posted on April 30, 2012, by Geoff Tuck

Already, much has been written about Michael Heizer's "Levitated Mass," that behemoth of an outdoor art installation made possible by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and it hasn't even been completed. If you haven't heard about Heizer's project, you might have been living under a rock.



Yet, there is another rock that is art, and it has been on display in Los Angeles for five years. It's worth thinking about in relation to Heizer's rock. On the east side of La Cienega Blvd. between Washington Blvd. and Venice Blvd., just outside of the Mandrake Bar, in a sidewalk garden, lie a number of rocks ranging in size from footballs to beach balls. One of them is an artwork by Lindsay Lawson, a UCLA graduate school alumnus now based in Berlin, and it's not a real rock. It's a sculpture made of concrete with an interior wooden armature. Lawson installed her rock in the summer 2007, just as the then new Mandrake bar was becoming a popular destination for artists and art lovers.

Compared to Heizer's rock, Lawson's is subversive and unassuming; public art comes in many forms, but not all of it is grandiose or expensive. Albeit, Heizer's granite boulder, and the eventual placement on its reinforced concrete trench, invites us to consider various topics including art and economics, art and the media, masculinity, or questions like: how the heck were those pyramids built anyway? Lawson's rock is different. It was a guerilla, D.I.Y. maneuver. There was no red tape and no permits were required for her installation. There was no budget, and the artist was paid nothing—the artwork doesn't even have a title. It has since become a (semi)permanent outdoor public artwork in one of Los Angeles' prime contemporary art locales.



While Heizer is notoriously reclusive and mum about his project, Lawson openly shared her thoughts with me about her rock. She told me that her initial impetus for the sculpture came from the idea of thinking about ideas. She had asked herself, what form does an abstract idea take when made concrete? Is an abstract idea amorphous—that is to say formless like spittle, or a spider? Are the edges sharp or round, or ever extending? Would an idea be subtle, creeping up on you, or would it lurk among other ideas? Or would it be monumental, hitting you over the head, so to speak? And, how does the form of an idea change when considered by different thinkers? In the past five years, thousands of people have walked past Lawson's sculpture on their way to one of the many galleries on La Cienega Blvd. Many more have stood next to her rock while the doorman at the Mandrake checked their ID to see if they were of legal drinking age. In just 11 nights tens of thousands of people witnessed Emmert International's transporter haul Heizer's rock to LACMA. Many thousands more will see it after it has been installed, seemingly hovering over their heads like a massive thought balloon from a comic strip.

For Lawson, the concrete was taken to its literal and material end, the idea manifesting itself sculpturally in the form of a rock. From there, the artist released the rock to the outdoors, and into the public, where it took on a life of its own. It has since weathered and slightly decayed. The north side of its thin concrete topcoat is cracked and peeling, revealing a cleaner, earthier toned concrete beneath.



One might consider that both of these rocks, to differing degrees are components of a simulacrum—they have us questioning what is real, and what is not, what is on the surface, and what lies at its core. Is Heizer's "Levitated Mass," wrapped in its white veil and consecrated with a dramatic entrance, more an exercise in theatrics than pragmatism? And if all the fanfare was akin to the swooping gesture of a magician's cape as he lifts it to reveal the empty hat where the rabbit had been, does it matter? What does Lawson's rock say about materiality and our perceptions of what is authentic or "natural?" All artists are svengalis to some degree. Truly great artists make their tricks look easy and mystify viewers long after they have passed. LACMA's director, Michael Govan, claims that Heizer's rock will remain in place for hundreds of years. Maybe. Nothing lasts forever, and some of the best art is temporal.

As I watched the red transporter crawling in the night with Heizer's rock on its way to LACMA, a nearby witness, seemingly vexed, shouted out, "What's the big idea?!" Indeed.

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