

HIGH DESERT TEST SITES 2013

MICHAEL BISBEE STUDIO, MAGDALENA RIDGE OBSERVATORY, WAREHOUSE I-10
MAGDALENA, NEW MEXICO

INTERNATIONALLY KNOWN ARTIST ANDREA ZITTEL, AND FOUR COMPANIONS,

began the *High Desert Test Sites* series eleven years ago in the area around Joshua Tree, California. Zittel has an extensive history of doing projects that have a clear social trajectory and a philosophical emphasis on relational aesthetics. Her work is often accompanied by objects that one could utilize in a desert environment, such as various forms of portable shelter. Many of Zittel's personal inclinations for making art were transferred to the underpinnings of the *High Desert* series, and what evolved was an ever-expanding mix of individuals working with spaces that had cultural, social, and geographical possibilities previously ignored. Participating artists gravitated to sites like old drive-in theaters, mysterious rock formations, decrepit or abandoned towns, desert gulches, and old mining camps. One artist from last October's *HDTs 2013* created an invisible restaurant out in the middle of nowhere in the California desert that people could nevertheless find with the aid of a cryptic map.

The projects from *HDTs 2013* were, geographically speaking, the most ambitious yet and, though they began as usual around Joshua Tree, they also encompassed sites along Route 66 and culminated in pieces created in Albuquerque, Belen, and Magdalena. The sites in Magdalena ranged from a more traditional space, such as the studio of Michael Bisbee, to a mountaintop. Bisbee showed a series of video pieces that were all part of one installation and addressed the seductive properties of water while also implying something deeper—the potential absence of water with its accompanying psychological chill generated when water disappears, as it did in Magdalena this past summer at the height of New Mexico's ongoing drought. A painter by training, Bisbee felt the need to investigate Magdalena's

recent water crisis by partly delving into the surface appeal of water with its reflective and refractive nature. His *Untitled* projection might have seemed almost too beautiful were it not for the actual skull of a four-horned sheep that hung on the wall and dominated the hypnotic movement of waves. The skull's dimensional presence against the flat projection cast shadows that at first made me think there was a huge black spider on the wall. It was as if the lyrical nature of water met a messenger from the underworld insinuating its grave narrative that, as New Mexicans, we all are caught between what we would like to take for granted and what is, in fact, staring us in the face: water's imminent scarcity if not its out and out demise.

The extremely non-traditional site was in the guise of the Magdalena Ridge Observatory, perched at ten thousand feet and reached by a steeply winding and treacherous road. (The observatory is connected to the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology based in Socorro.) The MRO is where California-based sound artist Chris Kallmyer presented his mountaintop piece *This Distance Makes Us Feel Closer*, a concert of car horns, pre-recorded and computer-controlled. Kallmyer's subtle and haunting music drifted out into the dusk over the spectacular landscape. The land fell away at our feet as we looked to the west of the ridge and, as the sun went down, a full moon rose at our backs. Shadows deepened as we carefully picked our way back and forth near the low-throated car-horn music that came to seem like foghorns drifting over an ocean of empty space, where the distant mountains looked like faraway cresting waves. One would be hard pressed to envision a more dramatic setting for a sound installation, and, contrary to what you might think, there was an

extensive caravan of people, both Magdalena residents and out-of-town visitors, who made it to the top. Here is where we met the very welcoming arms of Big Science, with all its far-reaching, data-gathering capacities, along with its unusual willingness to become an accomplice to art.

The newly established alternative art space, Warehouse I-10, begun by Magdalena artist Catherine DeMaria, was the matrix for an experimental play, *The Journal of Missionary Linguistics*, by California writer Alisha Beth Adams. The performance was essentially an early read-through of a work-in-progress, yet the piece never felt that it had a nebulous hold on its sophisticated and captivating themes. Performed by Marisol Miller-Wave as the character Fay, and Lake Sharp as Charity, the plot concerns two Christian missionaries at an unspecified time in the last century, and the pitfalls inherent in trying to translate the ideas of one culture into another more resistant one. In this case, the episodic story involves Native Americans in the Southwest and two Anglo women who attempt a clumsy dance, with its sometimes mutually exclusive steps, regarding both cross-cultural and interpersonal relationships. Indeed, it is this word translation, *traducere*, that is emphasized throughout Adams' writing as Fay and Charity slowly reveal their own histories—filled with secrets, revisionary thinking, and outright mistakes. The two women dig deeply into the "dysfunction of the faithful" as the play deconstructs, in a backward cascading fashion, the uses and misuses of language, revealing itself as the primary meaning of Adams' play.

—DIANE ARMITAGE

Michael Bisbee, *Untitled*, video still with skull, 2013

Alisha Beth Adams, *The Journal of Missionary Linguistics*, detail of performance with Lake Sharp (left) and Marisol Miller-Wave, 2013

