

Art in America

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Production still from Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler's *Giant*, 2014, 3-channel video installation; at Ballroom Marfa.

HUBBARD AND BIRCHLER Ballroom Marfa

Marfa, Tex., is the perfect setting for this exhibition of Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler's excellent trilogy of Texas-based, movie-themed videos: *Grand Paris Texas* (2009), *Movie Mountain (Méliès)*, 2011, and now *Giant* (2014), commissioned by Ballroom Marfa. The arid and powerful West Texas landscape, with its vast ranchlands, craggy mountains, searing sun and huge sky is a potent force in the mesmerizing three-channel video installation *Giant*, much of which was shot at the skeletal ruins of a movie set constructed on a nearby private ranch for the filming of the original *Giant* (1956), starring Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean. Hollywood swept into town with its movie stars and film crew, a signature event for area residents. After the cast and crew departed, what remained were abundant memories and the three-sided facade of the film's Reata mansion, which the owner of the ranch left intact on his property. Eroded by the harsh elements, it's now a faltering relic made of telephone poles, ragged boards and scattered debris. In their lush video, filled with solemn, stunning images, Hubbard and Birchler examine this steadily disappearing trace of a vanished time when the cinema, a small town and nature all converged.

Grand Paris Texas pioneered this theme, mixing shots of a once-thriving and now-bereft, pigeon-infested movie theater in downtown Paris, Tex., with residents discussing how they were affected by Wim Wenders's famous 1984 movie, *Paris, Texas*, which only peripherally concerns the town. Movies infiltrate landscape and psyches in *Movie Mountain (Méliès)*. Locals consider a commonplace desert butte named for a silent movie that was made there in 1911, and a cowboy surprisingly discloses that he once had big dreams of becoming an actor and screenwriter.

While related, *Giant* takes things in a fresh, inspired

direction. There are no local characters recounting bygone events. Instead, combining aspects of a feature film and a documentary, it juxtaposes two evocative artifacts: the 1955 Warner Brothers contract that initiated filming in West Texas, and *Giant*'s ruins. In a staged Burbank studio, a pre-*Mad Men* office girl with red lipstick and matching nails types the contract on an Underwood typewriter—top technology then, but obsolete now, which introduces a note of loss and disappearance. Close-ups fill the three screens: of the typewriter, its clacking keys and ribbon, struck letters forming words, the young woman's pensive face. You'd never imagine that a routine office activity could look so gorgeous and grave.

The video shifts to the ruins, which are investigated, visually and sonically, from multiple perspectives, at different times of the day and in different seasons, occasionally with an equipment-laden film crew visible. From up close the structure is imposing; from a distance it looks flimsy and ephemeral, almost apparitional. Illuminated at night by the film crew's lights, it feels downright otherworldly. Details are riveting and poetic: rusty nails, precarious slats, a crow. Elemental sound is entrancing: groaning poles and boards, bird calls, throbbing insects, a train whistle. Hubbard and Birchler's rigorous anatomy of a monument in eclipse is exceptionally soulful and also sublime. You look at and through it, toward the immense landscape and sky. Interspersed shots of desert plants, rain and wind, and ants swarming a grasshopper carcass underscore that the threadbare movie set is now part of, and dominated by, nature. Made from and about Texas, and shown in Texas, the exhibition was altogether superb. [*The exhibition travels to Dublin's Irish Museum of Modern Art in December and the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston in May 2015.*]

—Gregory Volk