

CREATIVE CONSERVATION

WHAT WOULD NOAH PURIFOY DO?

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A few years back, three freestanding arches near the front of “Quonset Hut” at Noah Purifoy’s Outdoor Museum of Assemblage Sculpture

in Joshua Tree blew over. There weren’t enough guy-wires to stand up to the brutal high desert winds. So, caretaker Pat Brunty piled up the ribs, and saved all the fasteners and screws. “It took us [three days] to lay out all the parts on the ground and look at it, and put it back the way it was,” explains Noah Purifoy Foundation Vice President John Cordic. “With the proper reinforcing, they’ve been fine. When you go up there, they don’t rattle. They don’t move.”

Along with board member and Carlson Arts LLC partner John H. Baker, Cordic helms the nonprofit’s efforts to maintain the late artist’s more than 100 sculptures on 10 acres of dusty, windswept desert. The pair and their crews visit the site up to four times a year to conserve the works “in the spirit of Noah,” who passed away in 2004.

But according to those close to him, Purifoy was vocal about the fact that he didn’t care if the works survived. He considered the environment a partner in his creative process. So, how do you preserve art created by a man who was interested in allowing it to change? “It’s a fine line,” says Cordic, president of Los Angeles-based RJC Builders, Inc.

“We approach it differently than just restoring it to what it originally was, in that all we’re trying to do really is give it a longer lifespan,” Baker explains. “I don’t think you will ever be able to have it there forever. I don’t think that can happen, it’s just the nature of the harsh environment out there. But what we can do is prolong its life and be mindful of the original materials that Noah used, the original way that he assembled these parts.”

Born in Snow Hill, Ala., in 1917, Purifoy was an arts teacher and social worker before he became an artist, moving to Los Angeles to attend Chouinard Art Institute after serving as a U.S. Navy Seabee during World War II. He is “credited with redefining black artistic consciousness through assemblage sculpture,” according to a museum pamphlet, and is known for the traveling exhibition “66 Signs of Neon,” in which he and six other artists created works using charred debris from the Watts riots of 1965.

After serving on the California Arts Council and as the founding director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, Purifoy moved into a friend’s Joshua Tree trailer in 1989 with only his Social Security pension to his name. It was here in the desert that he spent his last 15 years creating grandiose installations from

old toilets, bicycles, bowling balls and more – a museum with no fence, free and open to the community. While to some it may look like a junkyard, the site received increased appreciation after several works were included in a 2015-16 Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition, “Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada.” The show, which placed these weathered works into the perfectly controlled museum environment, not only presented its own questions of preservation versus decay but also heightened viewers’ awareness of Purifoy’s sophistication, delivering long-overdue attention to an artist whose wide-ranging works are anchored in modernism.

The foundation used the transfer to and from the exhibition to strengthen each piece, but back in the heat and wind, conservation continues in Joshua Tree. “It’s sort of this living thing that you have to maintain,” Cordic explains. “Like a tree or something. It just needs some maintenance. It just needs a little bit of help.”

To date, about 95 percent of the works have survived, says foundation President Joe Lewis. He calls Purifoy a “master craftsman” whose pieces have “stood the test of time.” (The other five percent has “formalized” its relationship with the environment.) At the core of preservation efforts is re-stabilization. Cordic, who

calls himself a “glorified janitor,” describes it as a “consistent propping up.” In doing so, the team tries to use reclaimed materials from Purifoy’s existing “palettes” onsite, keeping a similar “vocabulary,” as Baker calls it, to the artist.

For example, when a wall in “Aurora Borealis” began to fall over, the team bolted old two-by-fours across the top and snuck guy-wires behind it to a steel post in the ground. In another, “No Contest (Bicycles),” they removed the top structure to add old wood and steel braces beneath. The foundation has also repainted works like “Carousel,” and replaces clothing on pieces such as “From the Point of View of the Little People.”

Walk around the property, and you’ll also notice an array of obviously new, galvanized steel guy-wires with red tags. In some cases, the team abides by the idea that “it’s OK to let it look and be a little bit different,” Cordic says. A piece called “Three Witches,” for example, required extensive stabilization for its tall, spindly steel pipes. “The thought was, ‘Look, we have to put all these guy wires in, let’s not try and do this cute thing where we make it look like something Noah did,’” Cordic explains.

According to Baker, last fall the team even rebuilt an entire toilet bowl structure in “Sage at Sage (Collage)” after it fell over. Working from old photographs and original sketch by Purifoy, they reconstructed it in part using toilets from Home Depot. “What we’re trying to do is keep the works



as original as possible but also allow other people and generations for the years down the road to look and see them,” Baker explains. “You’re balancing those two things.”

When all is said and done, they “try and walk away,” Cordic says. “Let nature have its way.” But how many times can you change a piece until it stops becoming the work of its creator? Does the very act of preservation alter its natural progression?

“If you’ve got [“From the Point of View of the Little People”] and you’ve got a set of legs there with different colored pants on, are you going to be able to match those pants exactly forever?” asks Cathy Allen, a Copper Mountain College art professor and close friend of Purifoy who started as his apprentice in 1993. “No, you can’t. At some point, it’s going to start changing and if it evolves, how long before it evolves into something else?”

For the foundation, maintaining the site’s integrity can come not just from painstakingly preserving the original but also keeping the spirit of Purifoy alive. “We put new clothes on [“From the Point of View of the Little People”] because that’s what Noah would have done,” Lewis says. “It’s not anything outside the way he looked at things and the way he made things.”

The approach is an outlier in the context of institutional protocol (Lewis acknowledges this tension), but it’s not unlike the man the organization is named after. “Noah didn’t have this same persnickety – [and] these are my words – privileged outlook on the object,” adds the University of California, Irvine art professor.

In fact, Purifoy had a change of heart about the foundation, which he initially dismissed. Lewis says he “got on board” after the trustees came to his defense when a local land use commissioner threatened to bulldoze the site in 2000. Similarly, Allen says that “at one point, [Noah] was anti-museum because why bother trying to preserve something forever when it just can’t happen? ... But he was changing his mind about that. He did appreciate the past.” So, what would Purifoy have wanted with regard to the preservation of his work? In many ways, that question was and will remain unanswered. “I think sometimes he would be laughing at the measures, but then at the same time, no one’s really changed anything over there,” Allen says. “I also think he would feel very honored because his work was important. I mean, I think the tough part is he did feel that his work was very, very important, and if you think of your work as being so important, how can you just let it go? ... I don’t think there was ever a solution in his head of, ‘Well, they should be doing this and then they should be doing that, and they shouldn’t do this.’”

One intention Purifoy did make clear was the fact that he did not want a fence around the museum. But with increased foot traffic after the LACMA exhibition and recent incidents of vandalism, is there a point at which it becomes necessary to maintain the physical manifestation of his legacy? While the idea has been discussed (“It’s always something that comes up,” Lewis says), the president says they’re “quite a ways off from that.”

In the meantime, the organization is not appraising work and is “on the fence” about authentication. “Once people start putting a value on this stuff, all kinds of things start to happen,” Lewis explains, noting the security of the site. In effect, the absence of



monetary value becomes another form of preservation. (One of Purifoy’s Watts riots sculptures recently showed up on “Antiques Roadshow” and was appraised at \$125,000.)

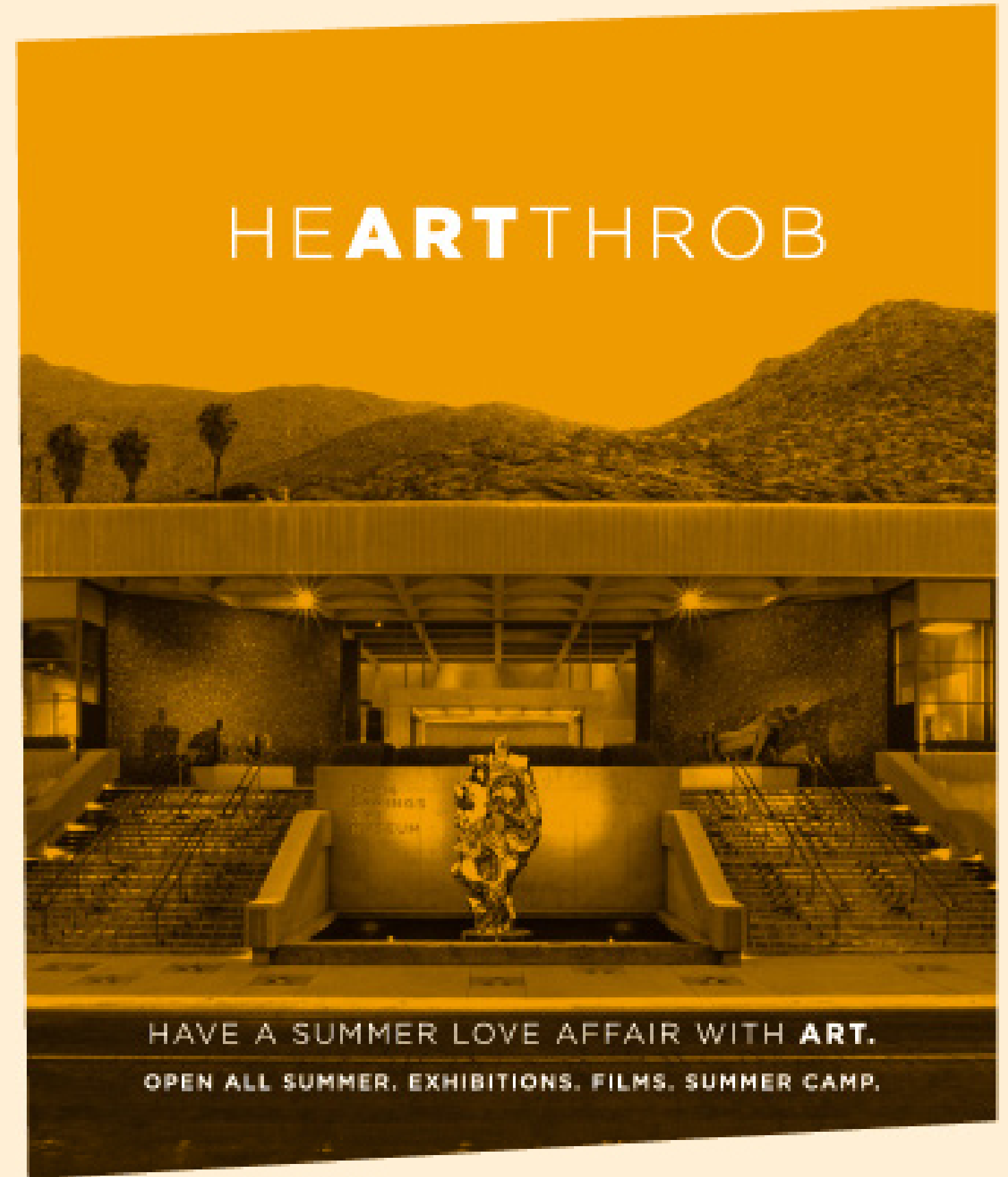
But really, how long can the pieces be preserved out in the desert? “The work is going to last as long as it lasts, what else can I say? Should we put a dome over it?” Lewis jokes. “I think that was also one of the things that Noah chuckled about because he knew that a lot of this stuff was going to disappear over time.

“The work is the work, it is where it is, and that’s where it’s going to be,” Lewis continues. “We do our best to maintain the work as best as possible, and if we have to let some things go, then that’s what happens. I don’t think any of us have considered the ultimate lifetime of this stuff. The work is always changing, and that’s what Noah wanted to do. ... We are staying as true to that as possible.”

Visit the museum and you can see the deterioration – “From the Point of View of the Little People” is so wind-torn it’s hard to imagine that the clothes were recently changed. “That’s one of the most charming pieces, I think, but I don’t think it should be any other way,” Allen says of the decay. She recalls helping Purifoy build “Three Witches,” and how she stapled clothes onto the pipes without knowing why. (He “wasn’t really verbal in explaining” the work he had her do.) Years later, she went back and, seeing their deterioration, asked if she could help “spruce them up a bit.”

“No, no, we don’t need to do that, they’ve served their purpose,” he said, according to her recollection. “What do you mean?” she asked. He answered: “Those are the three witches, and we put them up to get rid of the bad spirits of the building inspectors.”

Should the preservation of a legacy eclipse original purpose? Can concepts continue without the work? What is the boundary between ego and permanence? At what point in art do we let go? 🌱



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