

Es's Exodus: *An Unexpected Pilgrimage of Reconciliation*

In 2014, Carol Es took a ten-day journey into Joshua Tree National Park seeking one thing- healing from her painful past. After emerging from the desert and returning to the sprawl of Los Angeles she struggled to understand the transformative experience she'd undergone. Through producing this body of work, she comes to understand her journey through the paradigm of the Biblical Exodus.

Exodus is the central Jewish narrative, and one of the great stories of Western civilization. However, there are several parts of Es's experience that vary widely from the biblical paradigm. Es entered Joshua Tree alone-- there was no community 'escaping' alongside her into the wilderness. Similarly, when she left Joshua Tree, she returned to the same city from which she had "escaped." The solitary, circular nature of her quest resonates most strongly with another type of religious journey: the pilgrimage.

Author Rebecca Solnit explains in her novel *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* that "Pilgrimage is one of the fundamental structures a journey can take—the quest in search for something, if only one's own transformation..." Solnit explains pilgrims often added strenuous layers to their journey, purposefully making it more difficult in hopes of deepening the spiritual experience i.e. walking barefoot, carrying heavy items, or even placing rocks in their shoes.¹ This is echoed in the etymology of the word 'travel', derived from the Middle English *travail*.² This process allows the pilgrim to move closer to spiritual understanding by learning from their physical bodies ideas that are hard for the restless mind to understand. Solnit explains, "We are eternally perplexed by how to move towards forgiveness or healing or truth, but we know how to walk from here to there, however arduous the journey."

Es's journey was clearly one of spiritual labor. Each day, she studied passages from *kabbalah* (Jewish mystical writings) to center her and frame her wanderings. Walking the dusty terrain, her daily explorations were recorded through sketching, photographing, and video documentation. The artist literally carried items of hardship into the desert as explained in the opening lines of her video, *Up to Now*. Upon returning to LA she carried with her sacred relics from her journey (stones and sketches). Drawing inspiration from her experience in the desert she translated her memories onto canvas, paper, and video.

Es is part of a long tradition of artists who seek out new vistas for inspiration and spiritual transformation. Earthworks artists of the 60s and 70s (ex. Robert Smithson, Dennis Oppenheim, Michael Heizer, and Nancy Holt) entered into the desert, or similar terrain, hoping to unearth new horizons in remote locations providing an "expanded field" for

¹ Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin, 2000. Print.

² "Travail," Origins of, *Merriam-Webster Online*, Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. March 17, 2015.

sculptural discovery.³ Travel is simple in our global economy and visiting international destinations is easy. Anne M. Wagner, art historian, in *Artforum* (Summer 2005) wrote “spatialization is not the same as globalization... spatialization is to regroup the work on both physical and conceptual terrain.”⁴ Thus, an artist interested in a place must do more than travel to a destination for their work to respond to that local. For Es, this response is interwoven with her spiritual experience within Joshua Tree.

The California High Desert has been home to many artists, most notably Noah Purifoy (Noah Purifoy Outdoor Desert Art Museum), George Van Tassel (*Integratron*), and self-taught artists such as Leonard Knight (Salvation Mountain) and Jacob Samuelson (Samuelson’s Rock). Andrea Zittel (2002) founded the arts non-profit *High Desert Test Sites*.⁵

Es was very familiar with these projects prior to her journey. She devoted a full day to visiting Purifoy’s outdoor sculpture garden. She was inspired by his use of shape, color, and found objects to create large scale assemblages carefully placed within the desert landscape. Her *Abstracted Desert Series* pays homage to him and his playful (albeit sometimes dark) interventions. For example, Purifoy’s cotton candy colored *Carousel* morphs into the abandoned merry-go-round in Es’s *Peyote’s Walk*. Likewise, her spaceships in *Unexpected* and *Cabin Heart* loosely reference Van Tassel’s *Integratron*. Perhaps, the most interesting comparison is between Es and Knight. In many ways, her *Abstracted Desert Series* carries on the work of this fascinating outsider artist. It is as if Es is called to pay homage to Knight in each brush stroke. Es’s latest body of work uses a similar palette of saturated, child-like colors. She extends Knight’s whimsical rainbow and calico pattern effect beyond a solitary mountainscape-- unlike Knight, her lines and forms illuminate the entirety of her desert landscapes.

It is at the intersection of Solnit and Wagner’s theories that begins to cut at the heart of Es’s latest body of work. Es goes beyond a simple travel residency and creation of works responding to a specific region. She enters the terrain searching for an experience that extends beyond dust, spiny trees, and massive rock formations. Most importantly, her journey was more arduous than anticipated. She is the unexpected pilgrim, one whose search for healing led her to reconcile her past with her present. Alongside Es, we too can make a pilgrimage into the wilderness honoring the steps we take toward healing our whole selves.

Anne Hromadka, Exhibition Curator

³ Kaiser, Philipp and Kwon, Miwon. “Ends Of The Earth And Back,” In *Ends Of The Earth And Back: Land Art to 1974*. exh. cat., Los Angeles: The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, 2012, 17-18.

⁴ Wagner, Anne M. "Being There: Art and the Politics of Place." *Artforum* Summer 2005: 264-69. Print.

⁵ *High Desert Test Sites Mission Page*, Web. March 17, 2015. < <http://www.highdeserttestsites.com/page/mission>>