

VISUAL ART

Flavin's new flavor at Chinati

BY JOHN EWING

The Chinati Foundation, in Marfa, Texas, is a prime example of "if you build it, they will come." Artist Donald Judd claimed the rugged, West Texas town with a passionate mission, to install art in a natural setting and leave it alone. In 1973, Judd left New York and settled near the foot of the Chinati Mountains. Until his death in 1994, he dedicated his life to creating, from the abandoned remains of Fort D.A. Russell, a permanent home for his minimalist art and large-scale works by close contemporaries. The result is one of the rarest of treasures—a personal (some might say lunatic) vision that has weathered the death of its founder, lack of funds, and institutional squabbling to survive intact, attracting nearly 10,000 visitors a year from around the world.

Spawning an unlikely but lively art destination, the Chinati season peaks in early October when the foundation hosts its annual Open House weekend. This year, the unveiling of Dan Flavin's untitled (*Marfa project*) swelled the small town (and neighboring Alpine and Fort Davis) with more than a thousand pilgrims. Braving winter weather conditions, the devotees made the trek for a first-hand encounter with Flavin's consummately realized fluorescent light installation. In no time, they commandeered every bed, bar stool, and double cappuccino in a 30-mile radius.

To the dismay of locals and visitors alike, a rain-thick fog slid down the Davis Mountains late afternoon, Friday, Oct. 6, bringing with it frigid temperatures and icy roads. A biting wind drove the crowd indoors, where it camped out at Marfa Book Company, a bookstore/gallery/coffee shop owned by Houston dealer Lynn Goodie Crowley. In Fort Davis, it was standing room only at the Sutter's Club and a table in the Hotel Linguis dining room was a three-hour wait. Even the Marfa Dollar General felt the pinch, selling an entire season's worth of black knit caps to the ill-prepared throng.

If the weather nixed the region's top attractions—the McDonald Observatory's "star parties" and roadside glimpses of the Marfa lights—it did nothing to quell enthusiasm for the Chinati exhibits. The grainy, asseverity of the West Texas landscape is the ideal setting for the clean, chunky perfection of Judd's concrete and aluminum boxes. Lay a cold, gray veil over that terrain, and you have a scintillating prelude to Flavin's bright and masterful untitled (*Marfa project*). Housed in six of Chinati's 11 barracks (which were themselves originally built to house German POWs during World War II), the Flavin installation was conceived in the early 1980s, but construction was thwarted until the summer of 1999, three years after the artist's death. An odyssey of the senses, the work is authoritative and so simple in its address to the viewer that it takes over completely first the eyes and later the mind.

It isn't difficult art. The pleasures are

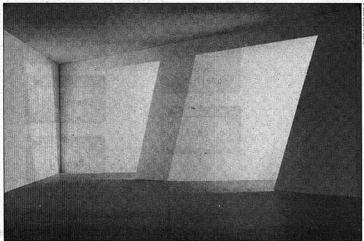


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Untitled (*Marfa project*) by Dan Flavin (1996); Left, pink and green; below right, blue. Below left, Chinati in toto.



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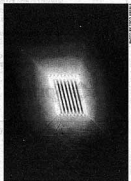


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physical and they come in pairs, a "two-ness" of balanced contrasts. Entering each U-shaped barrack from the ends, viewers walk down a dark, spacious corridor toward four sets of fluorescent lights installed at the opposite end. Each set is made of 10 eight-foot tubes arranged in a slanted row to form a parallelogram. Pink light is paired back-to-back with green in the first two barracks, yellow with blue in the following two, and the four colors are combined in the last two barracks.

In some of the installations, the light's face the viewer directly, illuminating the retina with a lopsided, two-listed blast of opposing color. In others, the pairs are behind partitions that form a partially obscured corner. In these, the fluorescent tubes point the obscured end with colored light, generating an

exquisite anticipation to cross the space, turn the corner, and behold the source. "Cool!" cried one young boy, over and over, as he dashed in and out of these intensely manipulated spaces. The play of colors, diagonal and straight lines, projected and reflected light, and the history of painting may be some of the rigorous concepts behind Flavin's project, but it communicates first and foremost to the body. That's what excited the boy, and the rest of us.

Over the weekend, *The Big Bend Seminal*, published in Marfa, ran front-page stories on Chinati and Flavin, and was stocked with gallery ads, artist photos, and a welcome to visitors from the Marfa Dairy Queen. Though we fell on their town like refugees, huddling in packs to talk, eat and stay warm, the locals greeted us kindly and spoke of

Judd and the new installation with well-informed acquiescence. A barbecue and dance brought the town out of the rain into a vast warehouse, quickly heated with the ska-tinged frenzy of Houston's Los Skar-nales. On Sunday, it snowed. After a breakfast at Judd's former residence, the crowd dispersed, going home to Houston, New York, and Berlin. San Antonians took to Highway 90 and noticed a balanced twoness in the flat plains and the leaning, ice-coated barbed wire, leaving the Marfa lights to the spirits of Judd and Flavin and the coyotes. ■

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