

Outside

The New Wild West of Art Is More Adventurous Than Ever

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From Montana's sprawling sculpture park to Utah's skiable museum, land art is having a moment in the American West — and it's more accessible (and adventurous) than ever



(Photo: Kevin Kinzley/Courtesy Tippet Rise)

Making a pilgrimage to one of the most iconic and remote land art installations of our time, *The Lightning Field* (1977) by American sculptor Walter De Maria, in the high desert of western New Mexico, isn't easy to get to by any measure. After arriving in Albuquerque, you drive two and a half hours southwest through the vast desert to the ranching town of Quemado. There, a [Dia Art Foundation](#) staff member then shuttles you another 45 minutes on dirt roads to the site, where 400 stainless-steel pointed poles jut out of the barren plain. You must stay the night in a rustic cabin; no day-tripping allowed. This isn't a walk up, walk away piece of art hanging in a gallery. This is an experience of leaving one world and entering another, and one that has the suspended possibility of a next-level lightning show. De Maria once said isolation is the essence of land art. Standing there, small and silent in all that space, you begin to get it.

Nearly a half-century later, land art is having a moment again—especially in the American West, where the terrain still inspires the big, the wild, and the weird. The new era of outdoor art isn't just for those who seek transcendence in stillness; it's for people who want to hike past it, bike through it, or ski to it. You might find a massive steel paper airplane planted in the dust like a crash-landed idea. Or a James Turrell piece streaming color next to a ski slope.

This is land art reimagined for the now—more accessible, more kinetic, and just as cosmic



The Soil You See... (2023) by Wendy Red Star is the artist's own fingerprint and is the first work you see at Tippet Rise. (Photo: James Florio/Courtesy Tippet Rise)

Big Sky, Bigger Art

A few hours drive north of [Yellowstone National Park](#), a working sheep and cattle ranch houses large-scale sculptures scattered against the dramatic backdrop of the Beartooth Mountains.

[Tippet Rise](#), at 12,500 acres, is one of the largest sculpture parks in the world, offering visitors a chance to take in monumental sculptures and attend classical music concerts in uninterrupted landscapes. Located in Fishtail, Montana, halfway between Billings and Bozeman, the art center was founded in 2016 by philanthropists Cathy and Peter Halstead. Artists themselves, the Halsteads drew inspiration from [Storm King Art Center](#) in upstate New York to take art out of the museum—to open up art and the land to people.

“When you’re moving through a museum, you see piece after piece, and you’re consuming a lot of art at once,” Pete Hinmon tells me. He and his wife, Lindsey, are the co-directors of Tippet Rise Art Center, and help bring the founders’ artistic vision to reality. Former ski patrollers, they possess the varied outdoor experience to keep both safety and weather in mind. The sustained engagement with The Lightning Field is something they hope to spur as well. Just as De Maria’s seminal sculpture was meant to be walked in, and taken in over an extended period of time, so are the pieces in Tippet Rise, says Pete.

“The Lightning Field is this in-depth, multi-day experience. You spend the night. It’s a really lengthened and heightened experience. We’re interested in that as well, and how you physically move through the space,” he says.

And space there is: more than 15 miles of trails and 14 miles of gravel road can be traversed by mountain bike or on foot. And while visitors usually spend at least a half day here, no two visits are the same. Sculptures are scattered hundred yards to a few miles apart on hilly terrain and steep inclines. “Through this extended time and space, it allows people to have a deeper connection with the outdoor environment,” says Pete.



At Tippet Rise, the concrete Beartooth Portal (2015) by Ensemble Studio (Antón García-Abril and Débora Mesa) stands more than 30 feet tall. (Photo: Iwan Baan/Courtesy Tippet Rise)

Visitors for hiking and biking are limited to 100 people per day, so it’s possible you won’t encounter another soul during your Tippet Rise visit. That’s the luxury of open space here, not exclusivity. Hiking and biking is free; concert tickets, as well as sculpture van tours, are \$10, and the number of people who can come per day is controlled via a ticket drawing system. “We limit the reservations, because we really want it to be an intimate experience,” says Pete.

Exiting the parking lot, the first work visitors come upon is Apsáalooke (Crow) artist Wendy Red Star’s *The Soil You See...* (2023). Red Star grew up on the Apsáalooke tribe’s reservation, roughly 120 miles east of the art center. Her monumental piece sets the mood immediately for letting art-goers know they’re on her sacred homeland.

A giant blood-red fingerprint, nearly eight-feet tall and modeled from Red Star’s own fingerprint, rests on top of granite rock. Etched in whorls on kiln-formed glass are the names of 50 Apsáalooke chiefs and tribal representatives who were coerced to sign treaties giving away their land to the United States government between 1825 and 1880. Often these treaties were signed with thumbprints (and Xs).

The sheer distance of terrain to cover means there are many ways to heighten the experience—and the effort. “You are having this sort of raw, visceral experience because you are putting in effort and moving through the landscape at a pace where you can notice the nuance of it,” says Pete. Sixteen permanent sculptures are scattered across Tippet Rise, including pieces by internationally renowned artists Ai Weiwei and Richard Serra.

“It’s this sense of exploration; you’re on this journey, climbing up this hill, or running or biking, and you pop around the corner and there is this stunning red piece, Archway II by Alexander Liberman, like a gateway arch into the Beartooth Mountains,” says co-director Lindsey Hinmon.

“We hope to maintain that openness of the land, so that there is that experience of being able to see the sculptures on foot or on land, and not feel like you’re seeing sculptures, every way you turn your head,” she says.

Last August, the art center debuted its new open-air music venue, The Geode, which is an art piece itself: four triangle structures envelop the sound and project it in all directions. The newest installed sculpture is site-specific Bronze Bowl with Lace by Ursula von Rydingsvard, which stands at nearly 20 feet tall and is made from cedar wood planks cast in bronze, set within a natural bowl surrounded by plateaus and canyons.



The Geode (2024), designed by Arup and made from steel and Douglas fir cladding, is Tippet Rise’s new open-air music venue. (Photo: James Florio/Courtesy Tippet Rise)

“It references the rock formations that are visible beyond it; the texture of it, the shadows and light that it creates, and all of the hues are just so at peace with the landscape,” says Pete.

A likely question that arises around putting any man-made structures in nature: how does this affect the environment? Pete is quick to respond. “We essentially have conserved 12,500 acres, and yes, we’ve installed several large outdoor sculptures on it. But [the land] is not being developed beyond that,” he says. “It’s private ranch land that is now open to the public.”

Using private land this way has a powerful place in creating more space for wildlife, Pete explains. If we were to confine wildlife to just public land managed by the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management, it creates “islands,” lessening the amount of safe land wildlife can live and traverse. By not developing land adjacent to those public land masses, a larger ecosystem is able to be created.

Tippet Rise is located in what’s called the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, which spans 22 million acres and includes the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Area, Yellowstone National Park, Teton National Park, and big tracts of ranch land. “Tippet Rise is one of those tracts of land that is helping create a buffer between highly developed areas and the wilderness areas,” says Pete. What’s more, all buildings on campus are heated and cooled with a geothermal system, solar panels provide electricity to the buildings and vehicles, and a gray-water system collects runoff.

“Humans are a part of nature,” Pete says. “I think that pairing these wonderful highly creative, amazing human creations alongside and right in nature help remind us of that.”



This winter at Powder Mountain, skiers will be able to celebrate dropping in by ringing artist Davina Semo’s monumental bronze bells. Installation view of Davina Semo, *Listener*, 2020–2024 at Powder Mountain, courtesy of the artist and Powder Mountain. (Photo: Drew Rane/Carlson Art Photography.)

A Skiable Sculpture Park

Hiking and biking miles to the next sculpture takes the experience up a notch at Tippet Rise, but skiing to sculptures? That’s the ambitious idea behind Powder Mountain’s new open-air land art park.

With its old-school vibe and endless pow, [Powder Mountain](#)—PowMo as it’s affectionately called—is one of the largest ski resorts in North America, with some of the most skiable acres in the U.S. It’s a throwback to what skiing used to be, with uncrowded slopes and its indie spirit. With more than 8,000 acres of in-bounds terrain, it’s virtually a ski sanctuary.

But staying independent and free from lift lines, while still being a viable ski resort, hasn't been easy in recent years, and its new owner has brought in some controversial changes. In a bold business shakeup, Powder Mountain's new billionaire owner, Netflix co-founder Reed Hastings, announced he was taking the resort semi-private for homeowners and lifting a longtime season pass cap. Adding on an ambitious approach to preserve its magic by creating an open-air museum with artworks that are reachable via hiking—and yes, skiing—is, understandably, being met with more excitement and open minds.

The visionary idea behind using the Utah ski resort's vast terrain as an art park came from Powder Mountain's chief creative officer Alex Zhang. "I always had a really strong connection to the mountain, and it held a special place in my heart, mostly because I think in the American West, so many ski resorts and ski towns are overdeveloped. They're super crowded. They've lost a lot of that soul," says Zhang, who has been skiing Powder Mountain for the last ten years.

"Powder Mountain seems to have retained this sort of rawness and the sort of soulful magic of like a throwback to where ski resorts, in the seventies, eighties, nineties, could just sort of be whatever they wanted to be," he adds.

Zhang heard the rumor swirling that Hastings was going to acquire Powder Mountain, where Hastings was already a homeowner. So when Hastings asked Zhang what he would do with Powder Mountain if he were him, he had already given it great thought. At the time, Hastings was asking everyone from the executives of the resort to the shuttle driver: "What makes this place special? And what would you do to protect it?"

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Zhang said Hastings was in a very receptive, open-minded mood to dream up something exciting. So in that first conversation, he shared his idea for how you preserve the soul of a place without overdeveloping it, all while increasing visitation and tourism in a way that honors the culture and the place.

"The easy thing to do just to make it a solvent business would be to build a bunch of retail, shopping, restaurants, condos, and sort of do that over seven years and build as fast as you can, and call it a day," says Zhang, noting that's what most American ski towns have done.

"So I came to him with this idea around involving artists and involving culture at an earlier level of this development, so a lot of that magic will actually be preserved," he says. "It will increase visitors not as fast as a shopping mall, but it will be a lot more enduring, and with a more diverse, interesting audience."

**POLSKIN
ARTS**

Zhang was inspired by the Japanese “art islands” of Naoshima and Teshima, where art breathed new life into these depopulated and aging islands. And unlike Desert X, the biennial contemporary art show held in the Coachella Valley, these would be permanent installations.

The perceived weaknesses of Powder Mountain—isolation, the single road, and the expansive, underdeveloped terrain—could be just the thing to save it, thought Zhang. Its shoots and glades, powder skiing in the trees, and off-piste terrain all make it the perfect place for discovery. There’s a “magic school bus,” as the locals call it, an abandoned school bus that found its way into the middle of the forest some 15, 20, years ago, that people hang around and take pictures in.

“What if instead of that old hippie-dippie bus, it was contemporary art by a really important artist, and it had even more of a wow factor, because it was a 30-foot sculpture that had a ton of excitement and artistic merit behind it,” Zhang imagined.



Launch Intention (2014) by Griffin Loop at Powder Mountain (Photo: Tristan Sadler)

Awe, Art, and the Sublime

This initial idea evolved into creating an outdoor, skiable, open-air museum, one that will unlock a multi-season art experience: biking in the summer, hiking in the fall, skiing in the winter. There was a resounding “hell yes” from world-class artists, Zhang says, who were so excited by the ambition of creating something monumental at scale and integrated into nature and landscape. Light master James Turrell, text-based artist Jenny Holzer, and provocative sculptor Paul McCarthy are part of the lineup of iconic artists on board. And a major work of late land art pioneer Nancy Holt will be permanently installed at Powder Mountain.

These site-specific works will be permanently installed on Powder Mountain; several of the large-scale pieces already are, while some are in the works for an official unveiling in 2027. All the art will be free and accessible to the public via hiking and biking during summer and fall, and skiable with a lift ticket or season pass during the winter. And you don't have to worry about dodging sculptures in the middle of a ski run: all artworks will be carefully placed to avoid disruption of the ski experience. In fact, you might not even find them, they'll be so integrated into the landscape.

The first newly installed art piece, *Relay (Powder Mountain)* (2023), created by the art duo Gerard & Kelly, is a whimsical but functional ski magic carpet that takes people 90 feet up the ski slope on a converter belt covered by rainbow-banded canopy. *Listener, Reflector, and Mother* (2024) by Davina Semo consists of three six-foot bronze bells at the peaks of Powder Mountain. Right before you drop into your ski experience, you ring the bell, and it creates this amazing sound. The ring and echo is like a call and response that you hear in different parts of the mountain.

One of the much-anticipated works is by Turrell, who is no stranger to ambitious projects. (Take Roden Crater, a two-mile-wide extinct volcano in Arizona he's been carving a naked-eye observatory into since 1977). The 82-year-old artist's walk-in light installation *Ganzfeld Apani* (2011), originally commissioned for the 2011 Venice Biennale, is set to be installed in a trailside pavilion at Powder Mountain in 2027.

It's a particularly fitting piece, as "Ganzfeld" refers to the German word to describe a "complete field" or perceptual deprivation, also known as the Ganzfeld effect. One of the ways this disorienting loss of depth perception is caused is by snow blindness during a blizzard, which can cause hallucinations. Turrell's immersive installation changes colors and covers the entire space—a simulated "snow blindness" effect that could occur naturally on this same mountain.



Spiral Jetty is an earthwork sculpture constructed in April 1970 that is considered to be the most important work of American sculptor Robert Smithson. (Photo: Alamy)

"There's always been this sort of fear coded into [our] DNA about [mountains], but always viewed as the sublime," says Zhang. "Think of the landscape paintings in the 19th century of this sort of Manifest Destiny, and looking out and surveying a great land."

For Zhang, the scale of mountains and the scale of land art both help us connect to a feeling that's bigger than us.

"There's an intrinsic obsession with the wonder and the scale of the mountains. It's very humbling. It makes you feel smaller," he says. "And to me, great art makes you feel the same. Great art is spiritual, or it's transcendental, and it fills you with awe, and makes you, for a moment, forget about whatever was on your mind and be in the present moment."

That feeling of the sublime, the feeling of spirituality, you get that when you're in the presence of great nature, you get that when you're in the presence of great art too, he believes. "And I think the fusion of those two together will create a very, very transcendental experience for people who might not even know that they're looking for it."

The Desert Canvas

A radical movement paved the way for today's land art.

Picture this: It's 1970, and you're an artist who's fed up with stuffy galleries and urban sprawl. So what do you do? You go west to push some boundaries and to collaborate with nature.

In the seventies, renegade artists decided the American West's endless stretches of wild space were everything they needed. Armed with heavy rocks and cranes, and a healthy contempt for convention, they set out to make art so big, utterly un-sellable, and in the remotest of spaces that it would break the system.

Take Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty (1970), a 1,500-foot-long coil of earth and black basalt jutting into Utah's Great Salt Lake like some prehistoric sea monster taking a nap. Smithson moved 6,000 tons of material to create this 15-foot-wide walkway that spirals into pink algae-tinged waters. The best part? Sometimes it disappears entirely when water levels rise, as if the lake itself is playing curator.

Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels (1973–76) consists of four massive concrete cylinders arranged in Utah's Great Basin Desert, like an ancient astronomical computer. Twice yearly, during solstices, the sun aligns perfectly with these tunnels, creating a light show that would make Pink Floyd weep. As Holt put it in a 1977 Artforum article, they "bring the vast space of the desert back to human scale."

Michael Heizer looked at Nevada's Mormon Mesa and thought, "You know what this needs? Giant trenches." His Double Negative (1970) is exactly that: two massive cuts creating sculpture made entirely of absence. His City, a 1.5-mile behemoth of compacted rock and concrete, took 50 years to complete.

Then there's James Turrell, who has spent the past five decades transforming Arizona's Roden Crater—a two-mile-wide extinct volcano in the Painted Desert—into a naked-eye observatory, carving chambers and tunnels that will, one day, open to the public.

The desert, it turns out, makes an excellent gallery. It never closes and the lighting is always perfect.

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