



Barbara Davis Gallery

Marfa Lights Miguel Soler-Roig

Sep. 9 - Oct. 7, 2022



Gallery

At the Marfa Center, all the resident artists agree in highlighting the enormous influence that the environment has on their work and their experiences. Miguel Soler-Roig has understood similar themes in artistic residencies such as the NMAC Foundation (*Montenmedio Contemporary Art Center*) in Cádiz in the summer of 2014, a unique open-air museum space in Spain that establishes a dialogue between contemporary art and nature in perfect harmony. A remarkable collection of outdoor sculptures and installations has been consolidated, with paramount creators such as James Turrell and Marina Abramovic.

In Marfa, he again is inspired by a powerful natural atmosphere that is imbued with history and cultural references. The environment guides his photographs, methods, and his emotional state. The images show us the silence, the coldness and desolation of the city when it is deprived of artistic activity. The radiant light of the desert hits the empty streets, the austere buildings and the varied angles of concrete sculptures completely integrated into the landscape. All sense of spatial limit is lost, like the Texan horizon. As he describes in his own words:

I started my journey westward, with no time or distance to limit me: only the road ahead. In front of me there was an endless straight line leading to the sun. I felt that I was chasing it, accompanying into the twilight. In reality, it manifested itself as my only destination. Image after image, mile after mile. The great star set the pace.

I have always been struck by the peculiarity of the American landscape for its incomparable vastness, free of shadows and interruptions. This has to do with the sun, with its possibility of expansion, of flooding everything thanks to a liberated luminosity. This phenomenon can be observed in very few places around the globe; in Spain, where the plains dominate in some parts of Castile, in Siberia, the Gobi Desert in China or certain parts of Australia.

Through this landscape I felt, I let myself go. I let go of the reins of my gaze until I reached a meditative stage – everything was calm, like an imperturbable horizon. The path was defined by gradually approaching the West, with its corresponding consequences, both material and symbolic.

As I advanced, civilization was disappearing; from the most populated towns in Texas – Houston, Austin, San Antonio – to less inhabited ones in the border of Mexico near the Amistad Dam, it all faded away.

At the same time, I was shedding the superficiality of my personality. Tucked into the immensity of the landscape, I was entering the deepest layers of subjectivity – those in which a solitary traveller loses oneself, getting to know the self a little more, while seeking to live new adventures. The American Southwest is like a giant plateau. Along the way I spent the nights in transient motels that gave me back a hint of urbanity: illuminated signs, gas stations and street lamps tinged the intimacy of the interior landscape, despite being so distinctive scenarios of the road trip culture.



Route 17

As the journey progressed I was bumping into the American stereotypes of modern civilization. It is not surprising that in the villages along the road and the traditional Apache, Tonkawa, Comanche and Jumano tribal populations have been interjected with elements of the purest American pop: Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Mobil... My travel continued. I passed old motels and neon diners, driving with a soda in one hand, the Eagles playing on the radio, a bandana flapping in the wind as I was cruising Route 90 and the road stretched miles ahead of me. My dream came true with the images I took on the way to Marfa. In my photographs, I captured that special light that emanates across the mountains of the Trans-Pecos region, close to the border of Mexico, from the desert of Chihuahua, by the Santa Elena Canyon and Big Bend National Park.

However, the landscape looms as the great contrast, its unique nature going beyond human interventions, flaunting its spectacular essence: the banners of days gone by, small town stores and businesses – the barber shops, drug stores, and ice cream parlors – present the nostalgic imagery of the old Southwest that remains popular to this day. All of this and much more is the inspiration for the cultural phenomenon we call Americana. By the simplest definition, Americana is art that represents objects or images associated with the United States. More often than not, however, artists have used Americana as a means of cultural critique rather than to promote American values. Consumer society has been appropriated by some of the most celebrated works of pop artists, such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Jasper Johns, and by thought-provoking visual symbols in art by Robert Longo, Shepard Fairey, Peter Tunney, John Outterbridge, Tony Cox, Ed Ruscha and many others. Nevertheless, there is yet another definition, one that uses this term to suggest a certain way of living, and a certain value system that for some is considered lost.



Pure Joy

This American perspective can come alive in the collectibles and memorabilia available at yard sales and antique stores along western highways. My photographs do the same, they are merely recollections of local atmospheres and environments. In Marfa Lights I wanted to reflect these American memories as visions related to the history, folklore, cultural heritage and geography of this country. They include everyday sights such as buildings, streets, cars, signs... but most important is the light that accompanies them. It illuminates the sky that encloses and paints everything. That light, as an essential part of their aura, keeps them frozen in the moment buzzing with nostalgia, and communicates with a certain aesthetic quality of progress associated with the evolution of the United States. I have tried to ensure that my photographs exude a decisively plastic beauty, not merely informative, but empathetic, reaching for emotional connection. I seek to immortalize this feeling and be able to turn those emotions into memories that I later share. A pinch of romantic depiction of small town life in the early 20th century, considered by the public as "the good ol' days" are still trapped in the town of Marfa today.



Hairy Car

What I depict here is the broad phenomenon that celebrates Americana while simultaneously providing some of the harshest criticisms of this country. The questions in trying to understand what Americana is remain rhetorical in most cases. The answers could be found deep in your heart, or perhaps in this small town in Texas, which explains the love for the country and the need to preserve its identity and history. My artistic interpretation should be seen as a vehicle that conveys cultural identity filled with different metaphors and memories, speaking to the trajectory of American history and all the amazing and beautiful things that most of us recognize and love.



Lincoln St

To sum up my work in this part of the American Southwest I can quote Georgia O'Keeffe: "Such a beautiful, untouched lonely feeling place, such a fine part of what I call the 'Faraway'. It is a place I have painted before... even now I must do it again."

As a witness to the surroundings I expand my vision beyond the iconic image of Judd, to the great outside world that surrounds the streets of Presidio County, a former mining town that had its heyday with silver mining in the late 19th century. From there I contemplate at the stroke of midnight, in the distance at the end of the horizon, the famous Marfa Lights.

Following my journey through the small-town beauty of Marfa, I continued driving West in search of the Prada Marfa Installation, then to Van Horn, Sierra Blanca, El Paso and ended at White Sands near the Mescalero Indian Reservation, but that's another story...

After selecting the images for the exhibition, I considered a symbolic installation; for example some objects symbolize the desolation and empty expanses of the land just beyond the American frontier, which opens out into the unknown with uncertain origins and mysterious destinations, like tumbleweeds moving across the land at mercy of the wind.

*Miguel Soler-Roig
Marfa Lights, 2018*



Marfa Lights