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sonic highways

scott benzel's mythical, musical journey into the heart of the american west

by michael slenske
portrait by mason poole

DO NOT ENTER

Though the sign is sun-bleached and splintered, its message—painted in bold black letters—couldn't be any clearer. The warning stands before a small village of graffiti-tagged outbuildings, including a shuttered gas station and a boarded-up school. The latter brims with a flotsam of shattered mirrors, disarticulated furniture, crumbling ceiling tiles, and an old Laffargue upright piano that still carries a note or two despite being stripped down to a skeletal, dry-rotted carcass. Outside, a maelstrom of mutilated palm trees form circular, triangular, and ovoid configurations—some aligned like plump Cohibas in cigar-box formation, others splayed in meandering herringbone patterns that evoke slaughtered sentries—serve as elegiac effigies to this modernist manifest-destiny fantasia.

Welcome to Desert Center, California (population around 200). Incorporated in 1921 by teetotaling preacher and cotton farmer Stephen Ragsdale, who bought the land from a local prospector after he rescued Ragsdale during a mid-desert breakdown, the now nearly ghosted township was created as a centrally located traveler's oasis virtually equidistant from Phoenix and Los Angeles. Though the iconic palm "tree-ring circus" wasn't planted until the early 1990s—before the center fell into permanent disrepair in the early aughts—for decades the space has stood as a charming, 24-hour fascination off the I-10 for weary road warriors.

"It's kind of like the demise of the roadside attraction, but it's got this weird quality to it, too: the decrepit California Stonehenge," says Scott Benzel as we drive up to the site. "I

Benzel in Desert Center, California, 2014.

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love these quasi-mystical places where somebody nominates something and says, 'This is now Desert Center.' These people just made up myths. Here, the myth has fallen into disrepair, but it also has this quality of being something because somebody decided they were going to make it into something."

On April 2, Benzel hopes to create his own carnivalesque spectacle amid this spartan setting with a 24-hour-long performance, tentatively titled *Desert Center*, featuring a group of musicians who will mimic and respond to traffic patterns inside the circular central palm outcropping. Billed as a "dusk to dawn" work, the crepuscular piece is part of the Manifest Destiny Billboard Project (TMDBP), a multistate, multiyear collaboration conceived by fellow Angeleno Zoe Crosher in partnership with the nonprofit Los Angeles Nomadic Division (LAND). Featuring the works of 10 artists, each getting 10 billboards across the I-10, TMDBP launched in the fall of 2013 with Shana Lutker in Jacksonville, Florida, before sprouting John Baldessari works across San Antonio. The project is now in Crosher's hands; between the deserts of Arizona and California, her "Shangri-LA" series will capture the lush decay of a "wall-size floral fantasy" interpretation of L.A., which will be re-created by a local florist (and left to rot) at the Palm Springs Art Museum for an opening timed to Benzel's performance.

"A lot of my work is about going west, and both Scott and I are really interested in the deep desert," says Crosher, who hopes to tour Benzel's performance across the country. The two first met in 1999 at CalArts, when they were grad students in a "totally bizarre" Integrated Media program. Though the curriculum, she notes, "was all about trying to collaborate and the challenges of collaborating," this project marks the first time they've actually worked together. Benzel, at 46, has already earned a reputation as something of a master collaborator within the L.A. scene, having worked with the likes of Liz Glynn, Mark Hagen, Kathryn Andrews, and his former boss, Mike Kelley.

This facility with collaboration likely stems from Benzel's ability to delicately meld music, performance (or "directed

improvisations"), film, installation, and appropriation, as well as some sculpture, in order to tease out layers of forgotten or obfuscated histories buried in the literary, cinematic, and musical firmament of the megalopolis that is Los Angeles. Think of it as a Southwestern symphonic analog to Danh Vo filtered through the prism of 1960s psychedelia, Freudian notions of the uncanny, the sound experiments of John Cage or Karlheinz Stockhausen, and California conceptualism from Baldessari to Bas Jan Ader and Kelley to Michael Asher.

When gallerist Esther Kim Varet recently relocated her Various Small Fires to a Deco-tinged Johnston Marklee-designed space, featuring an outdoor sculpture garden and an entryway corridor created for sound pieces in Hollywood, Benzel seemed to her the perfect fit for the latter. In the past, he's composed original sound works from scratch or based on inverted and/or reflected interpretations of classical, experimental noise, and

RIGHT:
 Counterfeit Nike
 "Heaven's Gate"
 SB Dunks, 2011.
 Leather, rubber,
 cotton, nylon,
 steel, and glass.
 11 x 4 x 5 in.

BELOW:
 Installation
 view of Benzel's
 2014 exhibition
 at Maccarone
 in New York.



FROM TOP: JENNY WARREN; JOERG LOHSE

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pop music. Sometimes he'll play these live with string and rock quartets, or simply imprint them on a vinyl lacquer (an acetate master used to imprint records) that he'll manipulate alongside live musicians. For the VSF inauguration, Benzel christened the 30-foot-long corridor with a recorded inverted string quartet iteration of the Charles Manson–penned Beach Boys tune "Never Learn Not to Love" piped through a five-channel speaker system embedded in the walls. For the sculpture garden, he contributed an imposing replica of the Capitol Records spire (also inverted) that appeared to play the courtyard—like a needle on vinyl—with a flashing light that blinked out Morse code for *Hollywood*.

"Scott reuses his pieces a lot. They're all like cousins of each other," says Varet, noting that the sound installation grew out of a previous lacquer performance, while Benzel's fascination with the spire started with a video of the landmark. "The way he deals with sound and his ability to resample, there's a certain musical attitude toward reusing things in new contexts. There aren't that many artists I've encountered who have such technical finesse with thinking of visual arts in the more expanded field."

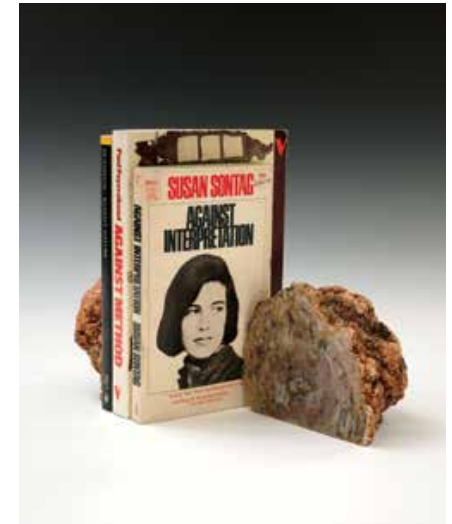
Crosner agrees. "So many artists get involved with music who are not truly musical, but Scott understands the language of music and visual art, and he brings music into an artistic context that works, musically and conceptually. That's really hard to do." (In another life, Benzel was the vocalist of the beloved Tucson-born industrial-rock band Machines of Loving Grace, though he doesn't consider that as part of his artistic practice. He also produced records for the likes of Jon Spencer Blues Explosion and Calexico.)

Today, Benzel's work relies on very few made (or even displayed) objects. Over the past decade, he's presented various selections of books (like Joan Didion's *White Album* against Andy Warhol's *A*) between coprolite (aka dung stone) bookends and reused those books in a kiosk "displaying various books and magazines [proto-feminist literature, *Frankenstein*, Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels*, and *Dianetics*] modeled after Jean-Luc Godard's 'ideology shop' in *One Plus One*."

I'm testing the condition of spectatorship and that continuum between spectatorship and participation.

He's spun lacquers to dialogue with David Smith sculptures. He's even crafted minimalist white maquettes of the landmarked Randy's Donuts building, which could conceivably be next for a large-scale steel translation. He's also been assiduously acquiring and exhibiting everything from the last game-worn jersey of his college friend, the late star Bison Dele, who is believed to have been murdered on a boat in Tahiti by his brother (who in turn died mysteriously from an insulin overdose) to a Chinese knockoff of the never-produced "Heaven's Gate" Nike SB Dunks ("a counterfeit without an original"), which inadvertently utilized the colors of the cult's infamous logo. He's even organized "Selections from Collections"—basically, curated bits of other people's esoterica—featuring everything from '60s-era *Teen Beat* cutouts to political street posters.

"Scott's systems can be quite complex," says artist Andrews. "It's about finding things in the culture that have a very specific meaning in their own context, divorcing them from that origin, and then asking to what degree new meanings can be teased out, once they are inserted into a new situation." This past summer



at Maccarone gallery, Benzel's New York solo debut featured egg vibrators playing drone music from the strings of a baby grand and a performance with belt sanders, DayGlo dust, and a female black-metal guitarist. Despite the breadth of cultural oddities he mines, Benzel says he does have a "weird personal connection" to the material he works with.

Often, the work involves making esoteric associations between various cultural moments. After creating a musical commissioned by the city of West Hollywood called *Music from The Trip in the Style of the Schoenberg Gershwin Tennis Match*, he searched out original posters from Jack Nicholson's 1967 psychedelic feature *The Trip*, with censor stickers slapped over the reference to LSD. The poster acts as a gateway drug to the histories, while the musical, which was performed at the King's Road Park pavilion, was a recombination of Schoenberg and Gershwin pieces and The Electric Flag's score for the film. It references not only *The Trip*, but also a real match by the famed composers/tennis partners as observed in passing by Dr. Oscar Janiger, L.A.'s godfather of LSD, who reportedly "treated" Nicholson before he wrote the screenplay for the film.

"There's never just one trajectory from which his references move—you see them going out in multiple directions, and that shows this complicated web of history and memory—and even though he begins with things that occurred in Los Angeles, most times they begin to move out into the American memory and history," says Anne Ellegood, senior curator at L.A.'s Hammer Museum, which hosted a Benzel performance, (*Threnody*) *A Beginner's Guide to Mao Tse-Tung*, of dancers dressed as Sharon Tate as she appeared as a faux Maoist rebel in a 1967 article of that title in *Esquire*, which the artist has displayed in previous shows. With the help of bows and coke bottles as instruments of sorts, the dancers, maneuvering around 100 feet of tape loop, maintained tension to play an original noise composition and a remixed version of the French pop song "Mao Mao."

"I look at Benzel in the context of people like Mike Kelley and Stephen Prina, both of whom he's worked with, artists who are deeply invested in investigations of certain histories and certain ideologies," Ellegood says. "They unpack and repack all this information in different forms and you have to reconsider it and look at all the different aspects and piece it all together in some sense."

Born in Scottsdale, Scott Benzel moved from Arizona to Ventura, California, and then to Las Vegas by the time he was in preschool. The firstborn son of a commercial real-estate broker and a junior high school English teacher, he worshipped at the altar of SoCal punk rock, and his first encounters with art came in the form of

FROM LEFT: *Bison Dele, last game-worn jersey, 2011. Original basketball jersey, framed, 38 x 20 in.*

"Against" Trilogy, 2012, a collaboration with Mark Hagen. Books and coprolite, 10 x 7 x 6 in.

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checking out books on Warhol and Duchamp at the local library and making skate culture-influenced zines with his brother.

Benzel discovered Kelley as a teenager, while visiting art schools throughout California. "Mike's *Monkey Island* installation happened to be up at the Geffen," he says. "I remember one work he'd made using mandrake root and semen. I was like, 'Really, you can do that? You can make a drawing with mandrake root and semen, and that can be in a museum?' That was integral to my early understanding of what art could be."

On the basis of some "quasi-political juvenalia," he got into CalArts—studying under artists like Mary Kelly and Prina—though he eventually left, finishing his degree at the University of Arizona. At the time, Benzel was interested in prints made from found images—sourced from vintage advertisements or, say, a Rod McKuen poetry book—which he then jammed up in a printer, creating forced abstractions.

In Tucson, however, he pivoted away from visual art into creative writing. His stories were "totally trashed and hated on," he says (coincidentally, by a professor who was also busy deriding an author who'd become the department's most notable alum: David Foster Wallace). While Benzel's own attempts at postmodern fiction were mostly dismissed by his mentors, his ability to craft complex narratives (typically in the form of experimental accompanying essays) has always been a key component of his practice, which expanded further on his return to CalArts in 1999 as an MFA student. He focused on visual arts during his master's program, but he also took music composition and musicology classes. In 2003, after an introduction by Prina, Mike Kelley enlisted Benzel to engineer records for *Destroy All Monsters*, and the two continued to collaborate until, and after, Kelley passed away in 2012.

"We had a pretty intense relationship. He was a guy I had lunch with two or three times a week and I was at the studio on a regular basis, and you just get a lot from that," says Benzel on the ride to Desert Center, choking up a bit at the mention of his

former boss. The weekend before Kelley committed suicide, Benzel had two performances, one of which Kelley attended. The two had also worked on installing Kelley's last realized piece, *Mechanical Toy Guts*, as part of a Los Angeles Free Music Society group show at Mary McCarthy's gallery, the Box.

Perhaps the most lasting impression Kelley made on Benzel was via their collaboration on the *Judson Church Horse Dance*, produced inside the basement gym at New York's Judson Memorial Church as part of Performa 09. On two sides of the gym they positioned opposing bands (each with its own conductor), who played music derived from Kelley's 2005 Gagorian spectacular, "Day Is Done," while dancers paraded around in horse costumes and played basketball. "It was an attempt to create a piece that integrated itself into the site, and that was my introduction to working site-specifically," says Benzel. "It really brought it together for me."

A year after that performance, Benzel was offered his first large-scale solo, at the L.A. alternative space Human Resources in 2011. At the time, he was busy painting large monochrome canvases as a vehicle for contextualizing his ready-made objects. For his exhibition "Maldistribution," he displayed various items—including the Heaven's Gate shoes, the *Trip* posters, and the Dele jersey—on their own, publishing an accompanying book of essays. "In a way, I was paring down my own interference," he says. "I wasn't even looking at myself as an artist at that point but, rather, as this person selecting these objects with these backstories."

From there, Benzel began engaging more with spaces. In 2011, his installation *String Quartet No. 2*, based on Morton Feldman's 1983 composition and John Cage's experiments, employed a recorded string quartet (violin, viola, cello, bass, playing in a lower register) with individual speakers representing each instrument to mimic street noises against the concrete architecture of Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. A year later, for a piece entitled *Funhouse after the Penultimate Sequence of The Lady from Shanghai*, performed at Greystone Manor, in L.A., for the LAXART/Pacific Standard Time closing party, he enlisted a rock quintet to play reflections and inversions of the Stooges's *Fun House* album, while turning their backs to the audience and facing a semicircle of mirrors, as an ode to the penultimate fun-house shoot-out scene in Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai*, which was shot on the Paramount lot.

Installation view of *Inverted Capitol Spire, Programmatic Architecture Displacement 5*, 2014, at Various Small Fires in L.A.



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"I think there's something about my work that addresses spectatorship and the problem of spectatorship and approaching an art show or pop culture or music as a spectator instead of a participant," he says. "I'm interested in testing the condition of spectatorship and that continuum between spectatorship and participation or culpability."

Benzel's fascination with durational compositions grew out of a conversation a few years ago with Robert Wilson, who described how, at the beginning of his career, he would embark on day-long performances. Last fall, Benzel and Andrews (an Angeleno appropriation artist who also worked for Kelley) created a six-hour piece, *Split Chorale for Viljo Revell*, which was performed last fall at Nuit Blanche in Toronto. (It was originally intended to run for 12 hours but was halved due to logistical issues.) The piece featured choristers on a balcony, cued by a video of fake choristers projected onto a mushrooming central column before them, performing a tone-based Stockhausen-inspired composition meant to dialogue with the brutalist Viljo Revell-designed structure. The performance, says Benzel, served as a "test run" for *Desert Center*, where he'll install another outward-facing

mirror in the center of the tree ring and various players—"everything from small string orchestras to electronic musicians to people doing Cage-ian things, like tuning radios"—will take shifts over 24 hours. "Some of the music I've been writing is sort of 'motorik,' like Kraftwerk-style German driving music," Benzel says, noting that "it was originally conceived to follow traffic patterns, but since we're so far out, rush hour doesn't really mean anything. The strings would be more like dusk and dawn, and they will be doing all of the glissandi to imitate when cars go by. You're actually moving up and down the neck of the instruments to sort of simulate the Doppler effect."

Understandably, spending 24 hours in the middle of the desert watching teams of musicians huddled around a ritualistic-looking mirror installation while mimicking wave-frequency effects might not seem like the clearest entry point into an oeuvre as wide-ranging and dense as Benzel's. Then again, his work was never intended for the drive-by gawkers of the art world.

"It's almost like you have to enter into his logic universe to apprehend the ideas he's proposing through his objects," says Andrews. "It's a practice that will reveal its rationales over time." **MP**

Documentation of Kathryn Andrews in *Opus I for Crude Instruments* (Summons to *GLIESE-581D*, *GLIESE-591G*, *KEPLER-22B*, *OGLE-2005-BLG-390LB*, *GJ-66Cc*, *HD-85512B*, and *EUROPA*), a 2012 collaboration between Andrews and Benzel in Marfa, Texas.