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Finally Landing

A new book and planned events bring land art to the level it deserves

[Zane Fischer](#)



Land Arts of the American West is more than a book, it's a vicarious vacation, complete with adventuresome diary.

SFR has been known to be mouthy and obnoxiously righteous about the significance of land arts in the this region but not without reason. The Southwest is a global epicenter of land art—everything from large-scale, permanent installations to fleeting performative resonances and more esoteric constructions—and if Santa Fe and New Mexico are to grow into our supposed art chops, it will be in large part through embracing land arts as one area in which we rural hicks have an edge.

The University of New Mexico began its **Land Arts of the American West** program in 2000 with assistance from the Lannan Foundation, with author Bill Gilbert having picked up on work initiated by UNM professor John Wenger. Rather than relegate students to slide shows and dismal, theoretical texts, Land Arts, a field program, pulls students into significant natural, ancient and art sites in a huge multi-state expanse.

It has been clear since the beginning—not only because of the quality of the work, but because of wind and sunburned faces of the participants—that Land Arts goes a lot further toward changing lives than a typical art class. Part history, part studio art (with the world as one's studio), part geology, part anthropology, part sociology—to name a few aspects—the Land Arts program is something altogether different from the strange confines of college and the increasingly lampooned geek intellectualism of art school.

In 2002, the UNM program developed a collaboration with the University of Texas, with its participation spearheaded by architect Chris Taylor. A new book, also titled *Land Arts of the American West*, by Gilbert and Taylor, documents the program's inception and evolution, and weaves an ongoing, substantive conversation between the two and writer William L Fox. Interspersed are essays by Fox, Ann Reynolds, JJ Brody, Lucy Lippard, and interviews with Héctor Gallegos, Graciela Martínez de Gallegos, Mary Lewis García and Matthew Coolidge. Perspectives range from deep inside Chaco Canyon to the illustrious and innovative Center for Land Use Interpretation. Published by the University of Texas, it's no self-

aggrandizing glamour text, but a significant document detailing what we can only hope will be the beginning of a long, honest and fruitful consideration of the American West: its character, its peoples, its places and what it means to interact with it beyond RVing out the Grand Canyon or shooting 'em up at the OK Corral.

A massive, largely Albuquerque-based collaboration in consideration of land arts will happen this summer and fall. Called **LAND/ART** and coordinated by 516 Arts and THE LAND/an art site, the Albuquerque Museum, UNM Museum and the Contemporary Art Society are joining in supporting exhibitions, site-specific installations, lectures and the creation of another book. Other events will take place all over Albuquerque and the surrounding area. In Santa Fe, the Center for Contemporary Arts, Santa Fe Art Institute and SITE Santa Fe will all be participating.

So, for once, here's a snapshot of future history about to happen before our eyes: Land arts are getting their due in New Mexico and, through a slate of books, exhibitions and investigations, there's a chance the rest of the world might notice. Then we'll have our hands full keeping all the frickin' looky-loos from wandering all over the place in a frenzied attempt to find "art." But that's a problem for another day.

Finally, it's heartening to see Wenger given such thanks and estimation in Gilbert and Taylor's book. Maybe next year, when the College of Santa Fe emerges as a bona fide art school, Wenger will come out of retirement to help set up a complementary program based out of Santa Fe. Hey, I can dream, can't I?

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Land Arts of the American West

By Chris Taylor and Bill Gilbert

University of Texas Press

