The Guardian

A mountain for Merseyside: why have Las Vegas boulders landed in Liverpool?

These seven stacks of lurid rocks are the latest must-see attraction in Vegas, delighting 16 million visitors. Can their maker work the same magic in Liverpool?

Cultural desert … Seven Magic Mountains, Ugo Rondinone's sculpture in Nevada near Las Vegas. Photograph: George Rose/Getty Images

A couple of years ago, seven stacks of multicoloured boulders appeared in the Nevada desert. Drivers passing by on Interstate 15 must have wondered what exactly these 10-metre towers were. Teetering piles of gambling chips won by giants in nearby Las Vegas? Cairns erected by shamanic hikers on acid? Proof that neolithic man had pop art colours in his palette?

Graffiti quickly offered other interpretations. A spray-painted "666" on one boulder suggested this was work of the devil, while some scrawled genitals associated the boulders with the rites of a fertility cult. And nobody knows what the jokers who wrote "Hella Spiders" on one boulder were on about.

Peak progress ... Liverpool Mountain, which will be officially unveiled this week. Photograph: Mark Waugh/The Guardian

The towers turned out to be a $3m limestone sculpture by Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone. Called Seven Magic Mountains, they were inspired by naturally occurring hoodoos, or spires of rock, and the art of meditative rock-balancing. "The attacks started two weeks after we put them up," says Rondinone of the graffiti. Was that upsetting? "Public art always draws protests. I see my work as communal art so I can't complain. You could not tell if these mountains were stone – or plastic or styrofoam. They're completely artificial in a natural environment. That contrariness appeals to me."

Rondinone's works are nothing if not contrary. In 2013, he erected austere rock figures in the square in front of New York's Rockefeller Center and called it Human Nature. "My idea," he says, "was that it was something very raw in one of our most artificial environments." Seven Magic Mountains came from the opposite impulse: to put something artificial in nature. His work teems with such oppositions: nature v art, ephemeral v permanent, dark v light.

This week, Merseyside will get its own Day-Glo cairn when Rondinone unveils his Liverpool Mountain, at the Mermaid Courtyard by Albert Dock as part of the city's biennial. What's that all about? "In Nevada, I wanted to make the mountains pop out of a grey and brown landscape. In Liverpool, I want to make them pop too. The city is so grey – it needs some strong, aggressive colours." The safe money says any Scouse graffiti attacks will be more imaginative than Nevada's.

Rondinone wants the work to become a Merseyside icon. "I love the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty. And that little Mannekin Pis, you know it?" He means the bronze statue of a boy urinating into a Brussels fountain. "I always hope my public art will be embraced like that."

Could the Liverpool Mountain become, as he hopes, a destination for art-lovers and selfie-takers? That's what happened in Nevada: after a difficult start, Seven Magic Mountains has become incredibly popular – with 16 million people visiting it in the past two years. "It was embraced by the neighbourhood, who started protecting it from attacks. The police check it regularly, too. It became a place to get some culture after the casinos and the Strip."

That popularity has been boosted by his idea of a monthly Instagram contest showcasing the best Seven Magic Mountains photos. It has all helped with the rebranding of Las Vegas as more than a gambling-fixated cultural dustbowl, so much so that the installation's two-year lease has now been extended to 20 years. "The ephemeral has become the permanent," says the gentle New York-based 55 year old, eyes twinkling.

Rondinone's art sometimes goes in the opposite direction, disappearing from view all too quickly. For his show Thank You Silence, at Belgium's Museum Leuven, he wrote poetry in scarcely visible pencil on the walls. It was easily erased by careless visitors brushing against it, but Rondinone didn't mind: doing art and being an artist, he has said, is a philosophical task rather than one to do with producing objects.

He resisted bids from China and other countries, who wanted to airlift his mountains from the Nevada desert. Though the work isn't quite site-specific, he thinks it belongs where it is. "I gave Seven Magic Mountains free to Nevada," he says. Why? "It's where land art comes from," he replies. Artists Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer and Jean Tinguely used this desert as a vast canvas in the 1960s. His mountains are a jaunty retort to their work. "What they did is camouflage their art in nature so you have to look for it to find it. I wanted to do the opposite."

Rondinone and I are chatting in a Maltese garden, an oasis of green in a city of rock. The garden is part of a military complex outside the fortified walls of Valletta, the capital, overlooking a harbour teeming with superyachts. The military complex, known as Ospizio, was used by Knights of the Order of St John resisting the Ottomans in the 1500s, and later by Allied troops defending Malta from the Nazis. Now this long-derelict sprawl is being converted into the Malta International Contemporary Art Space, to open in 2021. For centuries, the role of these buildings was to repel invaders. Now they're being repurposed to lure them in.

He has been invited here to launch two new works that riff off each other. Before us in the garden is The Radiant, a huge stone human painted blue and looking very menacing. Meanwhile, hanging above us in the trees and tinkling in the breeze, are 172 bells, an airy antidote to all that hard rock. This is called Joy. Each bell has a little tag dangling from it inscribed with a communal wish offered by children from 172 schools on the island, written in the lovely Maltese language. What sort of wishes are they? "They're about saving the planet, fighting racism and so on."

Atmosphere, one of the works in the show I ♥ John Giorno, dedicated to the artist's beat poet husband. Photograph: Tiffany Sage/BFA/Rex/Shutterstock

There is a refreshingly uncynical ardour to Rondinone's most sophisticated work. Take the ardent title of a vast sprawling piece dedicated to his husband, the New York beat poet and performance artist John Giorno (who was the subject of Andy Warhol's film Sleep). The work consisted of 18 immersive installations – from paintings to sound pieces, from drawings to archive footage – celebrating his partner's many interests, which include Aids activism. He called it Ugo Rondinone: I ♥ John Giorno and put it on simultaneously at 13 not-for-profit spaces in Manhattan.

"I was celebrating my husband through his work, my work and those of others," he says. "It took a long time and I wanted to do it right. I had seen a Jean Cocteau exhibition at the Pompidou and everything was in the dark. That was not how I wanted my husband to be celebrated. I wanted to bring him into the light."

Atmosphere, one of the works in the show I ♥ John Giorno, dedicated to the artist's beat poet husband. Photograph: Tiffany Sage/BFA/Rex/Shutterstock

Rondinone's work is so multi-faceted, his exhibitions often get mistaken for group shows. Good Evening Beautiful Blue, his recent 30-year retrospective that toured to Rotterdam, Cincinnati and Miami, was a dizzying multimedia odyssey. It included Vocabulary of Solitude, in which 45 resin clowns reclined in private thought, and Clockwork for Oracles II in which 52 coloured mirrors that reflected the viewer.

The show culminated in a six-channel video in a room swathed in blue light. It was given what may be the longest title in art history: It's Late and The Wind Carries a Faint Sound As It Moves Through the Trees. It Could Be Anything. The Jingling of Little Bells Perhaps Or the Tiny Flickering Out of Tiny Lives. I Stroll Down the Sidewalk and Close My Eyes and Open Them and Wait For My Mind to Go Perfectly Blank. Like a Room No One Has Ever Entered, a Room Without Any Doors or Windows. A Place Where Nothing Happens.

Despite its diversity, Rondinone's work does have unifying themes, most notably time and meditation. He once said: "I like to slow down and prolong the temporality in which nothing would ever end or be abandoned; where everything can reappear or reanimate itself; where past, present and future belong to one single and unique loop." You can see that desire in Let's Turn Back Time, Let's Start This Day Again, a cast aluminium sculpture of a 2,000-year-old olive tree from Naples. The metal rendering preserves what was previously perishable, while simultaneously capturing two millennia of growth.

A shower is raging in off the Mediterranean and we scamper for cover. "I deal with very basic symbols that everybody can relate to," Rondinone says as we take shelter. "Mountains, stones, a bird, a sun. Maybe you have different levels of appreciation, but the simplicity is always there. Look."

And we look out at the sweetly tinkling bells and the dangling messages of hope written by children, blowing gently in the Maltese breeze.