

ALEX SCHMIDT

Photographs by Kim Stringfellow

Art in the Land

Seeing through the sprawl

1. The Question

One doesn't visit the historic ranch house of cowboy-turned-actor Will Rogers to gawk at Hollywood extravagance. The cozy home sits nestled above Sunset Boulevard, in a leafy Pacific Palisades canyon. All of the old stuff in it—Rogers's furniture, his cowboy boots, his western-themed knickknacks and art—are said to be exactly as he left them, down to their placement over fireplace and atop table. So, to a ten-year-old wandering around the house, it can make for a different sort of awe—the feeling of physically standing in the reality of another person from another time.

For me, the Will Rogers house was the seed of what would become a long running (and, until recently, mysterious) fascination with tours that touch the past. From the Palisades, it wasn't too far a leap to the ghost towns of Southern California, where I'd road trip out to discover cultural remains of the desert. I never considered these trips critically; they were a hobby, and viscerally enjoying them without thought was its own reward. But I learned recently that physically experiencing local sites—touring—is an interest I share with other Southern Californians. The strangeness of that coincidence makes the question unavoidable: Where does our collective local, physical-aesthetic obsession come from? The centrality of landscape in Wonder Valley provided a clue.

2. Invitation

I took a summer trip out to the desert near Joshua Tree to experience a prime example of the touring impulse in Southern Californians—artist Kim Stringfellow's *Jackrabbit Homestead*. Speeding down a glimmering, black, two-lane highway in a Jeep with Stringfellow, windows down, hot air blasting in, speakers blasting out, we were hearing the piece—and experiencing it at the same time. *Jackrabbit Homestead* does not exist without somebody driving around in the desert. For it to work, you

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The Wormus Homestead from Kim Stringfellow's *Jackrabbit Homestead*

have to download a bunch of MP3s and play them as you drive a prescribed route. Historians and local residents talk about the one-room homes that dot the landscape, relics of the federal government's 1938 Jackrabbit Homestead Act, which enticed brave souls to colonize the desert, offering cheap land prices. Stringfellow and I would stop to park near the tiny houses—most of them crumbling and abandoned—get out of the car and walk toward them in the brilliant, baking sun, as meanings and interpretations from the history we'd learned buzzed in our minds.

One clue as to why Kim Stringfellow and so many others, including the LA Urban Rangers, Esotouric tours, and the EATLACMA project, feel compelled to take people to places is the visual transparency of landscape here. Like the desert, scenery in Los Angeles is unobstructed. The presence of mountains makes for a constant awareness of

geographic features (in LA, the ocean lives in the backs of our minds). The Southern California landscape is horizontal, compared to New York's vertical one. We can see vistas in Los Angeles in a way that residents of other major cities cannot, and not only because the city is laid out flatly—it's a relatively treeless landscape. To drive a New England thruway is to be inside a tunnel of trees. Driving through Southern California, landscape is laid bare.

The relationship to land, given the centrality of the car, is key. The map of the city is ingrained in the minds of drivers in a way that it might not be for people who travel smaller geographic areas on a day-to-day basis. Yet just as cars connect us with broad landscape in an important way, they also disconnect us from it. The heat in Wonder Valley, as we walked through the landscape, was an intense and all too real experience in itself. But many Angelenos rarely



The Kenney Homestead from Kim Stringfellow's *Jackrabbit Homestead*

walk for more than a block on a regular basis and fail to experience land as a physical thing, a point for those who argue that LA is an unreal, fake, and disconnected sort of place.

3. Accepting

More and more artists and organizations are offering tour invitations, and Southern Californians accept. The people who took off work early one Thursday morning for a tour of the Grapevine may have been seeking a corrective to that feeling of falseness and disconnection. Once, the Grapevine was the major thoroughfare connecting Southern and Northern California. Now, if you make your way up the 5 from Los Angeles, you eventually get to an exit called

Grapevine, but the old road exists in pieces. Our tour, the organizer promised, would give the place meaning in a whole new way.

The organizer was the Center for Land Use Interpretation. In the growing world of Southern California tours, the CLUI occupies a special place. It is an uncategorizable entity that exists somewhere between educational, academic and artistic. The Center mounts art exhibits at its Culver City headquarters and a couple of times per year takes a group of people to Southern California oil field sites, landfills or, in the case of the Grapevine tour, “a place meant to be passed through.”

Nick Bourland sat near me on the bus. Home on a break from his east coast college, he took the tour at the urging of an art student friend. A native Angeleno, he had



Interior of the Gray Homestead from Kim Stringfellow's *Jackrabbit Homestead*

never been on a tour bus in his own city. “Normally, I see people here getting on tour buses, looking for obvious things, like celebrities’ homes,” he told me. Making our way through the developed landscape, we learned about the history of sites surrounding the old Grapevine—a water pumping plant, CalTrans, an Ikea fulfillment center. This, we concluded, was an unusual experience in celebrity-centric LA.

The inherent bond between history and place—could there be a better antidote to the cliché of LA as being all about surface? Matthew Coolidge, director of CLUI, has probably thought more about the connection between LA and tours than any other person. Of the mushrooming innovative tours in the city, he says, “Perhaps this is the beginning of a trend, and there will be more over time, that put

the city in a mirror that’s more than where it can fix its hair and trim its moustache. It’s a mirror that’s not just narcissistic, but turns us around to see where we’ve come from and what brought us to this point.” These tours can be seen as efforts to wring every bit of meaning out of a place that is so often said to have none.

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Interior of the Guerre/Beckman Homestead from Kim Stringfellow's *Jackrabbit Homestead*

4. The Answer

Land and history are antidotes to the increasingly virtual nature of our current existence. Rather than being told or shown, when we touch a thing or experience a place, it becomes part of us, in a way that tertiary media that presents it to us cannot. In this way, Los Angeles and its mediated surface may be the perfect paradigm for our misty, nebulous era—and the tours that combat it a telling illustration of physical human yearning.

I was worried that our changeable times may have gotten to the Will Rogers house, or that my mental remove from the emotional tour experience might blunt the place

for me. But when I visited recently for the first time in two decades, the docent presented the house as being just as it once was, saying that as we walked around we'd get a feeling for "Will Rogers, the man" and how people lived in his day. Indeed, the old Indian blanket is still draped over the couch, the ink stains on his desk remain, and the metal countertop in the kitchen is as cold now as it was when Will Rogers's family touched it a century ago—and when I did as a ten-year-old. I felt a little shiver of meaning. I had touched the past—my past, the past of this place, and, now, our combined histories. The feeling stayed for a while as I drove down the hill, and disappeared as I turned onto Sunset, reentering LA's fast moving traffic of now. **B**