



SINGULAR SPACES II: FROM THE ECCENTRIC TO THE EXTRAORDINARY IN SPANISH ART ENVIRONMENTS

I began my review of Jo Farb Hernández's first study of Spanish art environments, 2013's *Singular Spaces*, with the observation that it was "so epic that even a large-format volume of nearly 600 pages can't get the job done, so a bonus CD adds thousands more thumbnail pictures and hundreds more pages of text."

Turns out it wasn't enough. In the 10 years since that publication, she found another 99 places to visit, photograph and research. This two-volume set is the natural outcome of that work. As I wrote the first time around, "If creating a world-class art environment requires obsessive devotion, Hernández is a match for the creators she studies."

Before more on the book, a quick disclaimer. Hernández's acknowledgments reference both Intuit and me. Our support reflected confidence, based on experience with the first volume and with SPACES Archives (which Hernández directed for 13 years), that this project was important and would turn out well. Our enthusiasm was not misplaced.

These are not drive-by appreciations of cool sites. Hernández dives deep, and it had to be arduous—not only the visits to each location but also the time spent organizing and editing such a content-packed book.

The depth of her scholarship is apparent from the first entry in this encyclopedia of extraordinary Spanish creativity. Besides the expected accounts of the art and artists, she explores the history and geography of each location, providing rich context

and detail. That's especially apropos since these artworks and their makers are so thoroughly anchored to place.

It's a fascinating window into the history of Spain through some of its most eccentric creators, but of course it's the exploration of the artists and their creations that give the book its true depth.

The profiles are full of artistic wonders, from Pere Bagur Massanet's giant cisterns in the shape of a hippopotamus and other animals to the wildly imaginative tomb that inventor Gallego Herrera built for himself, giving even the Facteur Cheval's gravesite near the *Palais Idéal* in France a run for its money.

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Singular Spaces II: From the Eccentric to the Extraordinary in Spanish Art Environments, Jo Farb Hernández, 5 Continents Editions, 2 volumes of 532 pages each, 1,050 color illustrations, 2023. ISBN: 979-12-5460-018-4. Hardcover, \$350

Photo by © Hervé Couton

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The ambition on display can be breathtaking, sometimes spilling over from an already impressive environment, as in the case of Cecilio Medrano Mendizábal, who also decorated parts of his town.

Hernández throughout manages to be scholarly without being pedantic, thorough but not wordy. It is all extremely well written and edited, with expertise dripping from every page. This makes sense given her decades of experience thinking about and documenting these places, along with the rigor of her practice as a folklorist.

Part of that rigor includes transparency about standards and practices. Her discussion of logistics, for example, includes the interesting observation that her accented Spanish may have made the artists more comfortable talking to her than to a native speaker.

She thoughtfully discusses and illustrates sites excluded from full treatment in these volumes; they look to be as interesting as the ones that passed muster. With a less careful scholar one might be tempted to quibble with those exclusions, but it's hard to question her judgment about which sites made the cut.

Altogether this represents a trove of information and a model of thoroughness for future researchers (besides the pleasures and insights it supplies current readers). One interesting subject for such research would be the effect of her attention on the practice of these artists. Did it influence productivity or content? And to what extent has it contributed to the survival of their environments, whose long-term status is always iffy at best? Recognizing them via work like Hernández's is the key first step, but ultimately it requires active intervention, both material and political, to give them a chance of outlasting their creators. Hernández, through her work with SPACES Archives and on the first volume of *Singular Spaces*, has been a vocal advocate for preservation, well acquainted with the occasional satisfaction of victory and the more frequent heartbreak of loss.

I couldn't put it better than she does in her introduction: "It has been unquestionably discouraging that the environments introduced in my books, an important element of Spain's visual and cultural heritage, have been almost completely ignored on a national level by both the government and its most important museums. Perhaps this new book will help motivate these powers to begin to prioritize the maintenance or restoration of at least the most extraordinary sites, supporting them so that the artistic voices of their creators can be preserved. This will not only provide representation to those who are least often heard but will also impart a more balanced, expansive, and authentic understanding of the very nature of creative expression."

Only two reservations about this publication. The first is that there seems so much more to see than illustrated even in these massive volumes. The detailed descriptions of the artworks notwithstanding, you really wish for more photos of each environment, perhaps in a supplementary web site.

The other challenge is price. If her first volume, published in 2013, was a bargain at \$80 list, this set, at \$350, requires an investment. But if you have a budget at all for art books, you should consider a purchase. The lavish packaging helps justify the price, but ultimately, it's the amazing content—photographic and text—that makes this two-volume set truly worthwhile. It is the kind of book that you will want to read over a period of months, or even years—each entry a little saga, and enough to easily amortize the considerable purchase price. ■

—William Swislow