

FIRST LOOK



Photo, 2014, from Daniel R. Small's project *Excavation II*, showing the mapping and excavation of a former movie set sphinx. Courtesy Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Center, Guadalupe, Calif.

DANIEL R. SMALL

by Ceci Moss

THEORIST VILÉM FLUSSER once wrote that history is “a progressive process of comprehension.” Los Angeles artist Daniel R. Small’s research-based practice, which involves photography, film, sculpture, and even archaeology, delves into the murky waters of history, revealing the persistence of myth and imagination. Small, who studied photography at the Rhode Island School of Design and the San Francisco Art Institute (where he graduated with an MFA in 2010), understands how assumptions regarding authenticity have long riddled the medium. The supposed task of an image, or an object for that matter, to accurately represent a clear-cut truth drives his exhaustive research, which ranges from the military’s production of uranium to the eccentric funerary rites of violinist Jorge Hiller, who had his remains cremated and made into a diamond phonograph needle.

Small has devoted the past six years to a sprawling project titled *Excavation II* that derives from film director Cecil B. DeMille’s destruction of his set for *The Ten Commandments* (1923). Enormous and costly, the set re-created the ancient Egyptian city of Pi-Ramesses in the dunes outside the small town of Guadalupe, California. Fearful another director might use his custom set, DeMille ordered this faux Egyptian city to be blown to pieces and buried in the sand. Remnants remain, and Small has worked with a team of archaeologists and the local nonprofit Dunes Center

to excavate the site, turning up everything from the crew’s dinner plates to the Sphinx’s headdress. Many of these items will be on display in the artist’s presentation in the exhibition “Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only,” opening this month at the Hammer Museum. Small will also show paintings that the Egyptian-themed resort casino Luxor Las Vegas commissioned from various artists in 1997 to adorn its main entry and walkways. These massive canvases, auctioned off in 2007 before a renovation, depict the set from DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* pastiched with oddities such as hieroglyphics featuring playing cards and dinosaurs.

In Small’s essay for the biennial’s catalogue, he details some of the unlikely connections to the film site that his investigation uncovered. For example, Lambert Dolphin, an author, geophysicist, and pop theologian, inspected the location with ground-penetrating radar in 1990. He had applied the technology years earlier during an expedition to Giza (funded by a psychic), hoping to discover hidden chambers housing the records of the “lost civilizations” of Atlantis and Lemuria. (He dubiously claims to have found the tomb of Osiris instead.) Small’s project uncovers the constellation of stories that surround, and ultimately define, the simulacrum of Pi-Ramesses lying under the dunes of Guadalupe. As the artist writes, “history is always being imaginatively figured even as it is seemingly being figured out.” ○

COMING SOON
Daniel R. Small’s work in “Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only,” Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, June 12–Aug. 28.

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