

Section 4: ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Big Sky PBR will feature Barn Dance pg. 51



Water-themed art installation pg. 53



Mission: Montana debuts documentary pg. 55



Impressions of time, memory and the rivers that run through it

The art of Gesine Janzen

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BOZEMAN – There’s an otherworldly quality to Bozeman artist Gesine Janzen’s work, a sense of peering into the past through the soft haze of time, especially the recent pieces that diverge from her primary medium of traditional woodblock print-making. Through a process of abstraction, her exquisite prints, which are often landscape-referenced, distill a scene to its Zen-like essence of line, form and color, while retaining their wholly Western context.

But in recent years Janzen, an associate professor of art and head of printmaking at Montana State University, has expanded her creative reach to more fully explore her personal ancestral history as well as the collective, in an attempt to weave together the past and present. In the process, she’s discovering that rivers often provide the stitching.

Janzen, a native of Lawrence, Kansas, moved to Bozeman from Kansas City, Missouri, 15 years ago for a position at MSU. A 2011-2014 series of woodblock prints that track the Missouri River as it winds its way eastward from its Montana headwaters enabled her to find a connection between where she came from and where she found herself to be.

“It was a way for me to connect to Montana,” Janzen said about focusing on the river that connected the two regions. “Not really an umbilical cord, but some kind of tie to my past.”

Janzen reached even further back into her past with “Passages: I am Here; You are Here; We are Here,” an antiqued eight-page “newspaper” composed of letters written by Janzen’s Prussian ancestors in the late 1800s, and photographs of the area alongside the Vistula River, now in modern day Poland, where they lived and farmed prior to emigration. Janzen produced the work in collaboration with the Peabody Printing Museum, which printed the combination of digitally produced relief plates, painstakingly handset letter press type and photographs on the museum’s 1880s Babcock Reliance newspaper press.

“It was a way to create a dialog between me and them, past and present,” Janzen said. “Maybe I’m just a nostalgic person to begin with, but I feel that reaching back is a way for me to figure out who I am, and my place in the world. The past is something we can know something about, but the future ... who knows?”

The use of newsprint highlights the ephemeral nature not only of the piece itself, but the passage of time. Part of Janzen’s attraction to printmaking is that it toys with the artist’s intrigue with time.

“There’s this idea of making an impression on a piece of paper from another surface that is kind of like capturing a moment in time,” Janzen said.

Recently, Janzen has been amassing paper reliefs of rural Montana tombstones, stiffened sheets of white calligraphy paper impressed with the stone’s lettering.

She doesn’t yet know what to make of them, so for now she’s grouped them under artwork entitled “Current Experiments,” a burgeoning collection of objects that also includes paperweights embedded with vintage artifacts.

Near her hometown in Kansas, Janzen found a barrel of individually-wrapped glass paperweight blanks cast in the 1800s, some with the decaying, brown paper still clinging to the exterior. She has begun creating little “memory capsules”



Print-maker and multi-media artist Gesine Janzen reveals a series of woodblock prints that reference nearby Sourdough Creek. Behind the artist is a piece that will be featured in the storefront of Montana Home in downtown Bozeman as part of a public art initiative that explores municipal water usage in Gallatin Valley.
PHOTO BY SARAH GIANELLI

out of the glass cartridges, incorporating photographs or sweet, small objects—a remnant from a rhinestone broche, a fragment of string—that strike a chord of sentimentality that is both intimate and universal.

“The experiments and the collage work have really freed me up,” Janzen said. “I decided to do whatever I wanted to do, and use objects and not just be tied to the printmaking only.”

Janzen is also one of 13 artists participating in “Upstream,” a public art exhibition exploring municipal water usage in Bozeman opening on June 16.

For the piece, Janzen met with Lain Leoniak, the water resource manager for the City of Bozeman, before composing a large canvas that combines organic forms based on a wintry photograph of nearby Sourdough Creek with information gathered during a tour of Bozeman’s water treatment plant.

“I tend to look at water as an aesthetic thing, a thing of beauty,” Janzen said. “But I don’t necessarily think of it as something that might have bacteria, and need to be filtered or cleaned so we can consume it. Art is another way to communicate, present information and invite dialogue. I thought my piece might provoke some thought about how we use water and what it is for.”

Janzen’s piece “Raw Water/Filtered Water/Service Water” will be on display in the storefront of Mountain Home on Main Street in downtown Bozeman from June 16-30. Visit gesinejanzen.com to see more of the artist’s work.