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Public art series 'WaterWorks' concludes on historic Kelly Ranch

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BIG SKY - Bozeman arts organization Mountain Time Arts wraps up its four-part series "WaterWorks" with a three-night light and sound performance that highlights the Gallatin Valley's agricultural heritage and water's vital role therein.

Staged on the historic Kelly Ranch in Four Corners Wednesday, Aug. 23, through Friday, Aug. 25, "Gabriel Canal" is a multi-media collaboration between more than a dozen artists and Gallatin Valley ranchers that provides insight into the agricultural community's environmental perspectives and the function of the valley's canal and ditch system.

"Oftentimes environmentalists and ranchers have different methods of taking care of the water but ultimately their concerns are the same," said artist Mary Ellen Strom, who with fellow Mountain Time Arts board member Dede Taylor, conducted in-depth interviews with the Gallatin Valley agricultural community over the past two and half years.

"Sometimes people categorize the Gallatin Valley as having an urban-rural divide," Strom said. "[What we're trying to do] is locate the dynamic space between urban and rural concerns so that solutions can be found together."

Area ranchers act as interpretive guides and escorts between the five-scene performance, and their oral histories have been incorporated into song lyrics and a digital sound score brought to life by regional and national artists.

While walking through the historic homestead, audience members will take in the engineering feat of the Low Line Canal, witness a range of traditional farming practices, hear original songs, and encounter a video installation that illuminates ranchers' positions on water conservation through two opera singers and a choir of 11.

The event culminates in a grand-scale reenactment of a late 19th century harvest scene and the illumination of the Gabriel Canal that features 12 performers and 10 horses. Custom costumes were made using imagery from labels and brands of agricultural products produced in the Gallatin watershed.

"The recreation of the [harvest] photographs is epic in scale and very cinematic," Strom

said. "They almost function as a historic mirage. History appears and disappears before you."

Directed by Strom, "Gabriel Canal" features a sound score by Greg Young; music by the Bear Canyon Drummers; a video installation by Laine Rettmer; a light installation by Jim Madden, Travis Cook and Ken Dineen; costumes by Alayna Rasile; sculpture by Jim Zimpel; custom made instruments by Joe Schwem; and an installation by Isabel Beavers.

Through public displays of film, music, dance and visual art meant to educate and inspire, "WaterWorks" has traced the Gallatin Valley's water sources from the City of Bozeman to the Belgrade wetlands and now, in its last installment, to the ranchland in a celebration of agricultural stewardship in the valley.

"I think it would be hubris to say [the project] will solve the [water] problem," Strom said. "But I think that art is a way to bring people together around the table, and that the dialogue around a project is as important and valuable as the artwork itself."

This event is free but space is limited. Those who wish to attend must register on the Mountain Time Arts website.

Performances will take place the evenings of Aug. 23, 24 and 25. Attendees must take a 7:30 p.m. shuttle from Zoot Enterprises in Bozeman to the event site. The shuttle will return to Zoot Enterprises by 9:30 p.m. Walking shoes are recommended. The hour-long project entails a 0.5-mile walk. Golf carts will also be available.



Dancers Laine Rettmer and Michael O'Reilly are part of a five-scene multi-media event staged on the historic Kelly Ranch Aug. 23-25. Entitled "Gabriel Canal," the collaboration is the last installment of "WaterWorks," a summer-long public art project that explores the theme of water in the Gallatin Valley. PHOTO BY ISABEL BEAVERS