

As twilight falls, people gather to watch a slide show on a stand of old grain elevators in north Bozeman, accompanied by narratives and music. The presentation, FLOW, was the pilot project of WaterWorks, a two-year series of art installations and public forums that will begin in June 2017 highlighting water's role in Montana history, culture, economy and environment.



A large crowd of people is gathered at night for an outdoor event. In the background, a tall, multi-story brick building stands against a dark blue twilight sky. The scene is illuminated by warm, orange and red lights, likely from stage lighting or street lamps. People are seen sitting on the ground or on chairs, some looking towards the camera, others looking towards the event area. A man in a plaid shirt and a woman in a red shirt are visible in the foreground, looking towards the right. A bicycle is parked near them. The overall atmosphere is one of a community gathering or festival.

what story do we want to be remembered by?

Through bold, temporary art, WaterWorks provokes community discussions on issues simmering at the Missouri River headwaters

BY ALAN KESSELHEIM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

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N THE WANING EVENING LIGHT OF AN AUGUST EVENING, people came streaming across Bozeman to the abandoned grain elevators and stockyards on the northeast edge of town. They came on foot and on bicycle. They were brought by a school bus. I rode my bike through the north side streets and down the old railroad bed trail. I dragged along my brother-in-law, visiting from Massachusetts.



We came, largely, out of curiosity. For two nights only, a unique program titled FLOW illuminated the sides of the dilapidated grain elevators and nearby buildings. No telling what it would be like, whether it would be worth attending, what the message might be; but if we missed it, we'd never have another chance.

People milled about in the stubbly grass, greeting neighbors, anticipating the event. Arcs of folding chairs faced the old elevators. We settled into seats, shrugged into jackets. Twilight deepened. The decaying buildings loomed overhead, once a thriving commercial center of town, now largely abandoned, the subject of fitful developer schemes and city park proposals.

A first planet pierced the darkening sky. People stirred in their seats, grew quiet.

A primal drumbeat started up and, simultaneously, a 90-foot image of flowing water illuminated the side of the grain elevator.

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LOW, presented in August 2016, was the pilot project for WaterWorks, a two-year series of art installations and public forums beginning in June 2017, intended to get people involved in issues of water use, conservation, history and growth in the Gallatin Valley and the Missouri headwaters. WaterWorks is a project of Mountain Time Arts, spearheaded by Dede Taylor, Jim Madden and Mary Ellen Strom, a threesome of artists, local activists and historians who have hitched their talents to this far-sighted and unique initiative.

“For me, the seed of this idea was planted back in 2003,” says Taylor.

That was the summer Strom presented

The audience takes in FLOW, WaterWorks' pilot project, in August 2016 in Bozeman.



From left, Dede Taylor, Jim Madden and Mary Ellen Strom along the East Gallatin River near Bozeman. The three are the principals behind Mountain Time Arts, the organization spearheading the art project WaterWorks.

Geyserland, a program featuring a train ride between Livingston and Bozeman, using projected images of horses, buffalo, crews blasting rock, and homesteads on the passing landscape. The event was a collaboration with the Crow Nation and used Eadweard Muybridge's photography as inspiration. Along the way, actors and historic sets reminded viewers of local history, western mythology and colonization. Over a period of several days Geyserland hosted nearly 3,000 people on a series of four train rides.

It made a lasting impression on Taylor, who, over the years, kept considering ways to bring similar attention to issues around growth and water use in the Missouri headwaters. Madden, a local architect and artist, came on board, and Strom has provided the artistic authority behind the ambitious initiative.

Strom is a Butte native and an internationally renowned video artist with the credentials and contacts to bring creative weight to the effort. She teaches at Tufts University in Boston,

consults with national entities like NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, and regularly interacts with artists around the world.

"I'm from Montana. I respond to the magnetism of this landscape, its people and history. It takes on a life of its own," Strom says. "Artists see things differently. Through art, people can experience issues in new ways and perceive new solutions to problems. I hope my art and the events we organize can contribute something."

The idea behind WaterWorks is pretty simple. Art provides a portal through which new appreciation, fresh ideas, and fuller awareness enter the public consciousness. Anyone who has stood in front of a great sculpture, or been moved by powerful music, or been provoked by a beautiful poem recognizes that power. And it is that same power that leads dictators and despots to despoil art museums and burn books.

"It's not so much a matter of changing minds as it is opening the possibility of transformation," says Strom. "No two people will have the same experience."

“Art has an extraordinary way of disarming people. It opens them to new ideas that ignite curiosity and vision. The conversations that result then need to move toward action.”

“This is not ‘plop art,’” Strom continues, referring to what she sees as more invasive and permanent art installations. “It’s dynamic. Weather, light, timing will change every performance, and then it’s gone. That’s participatory. That’s exciting. And it’s rare.”

WaterWorks has developed out of that trio’s collaboration, sparked by Taylor’s inspirational experience, and has blossomed into a major initiative with widespread support. Following Strom’s production of FLOW, and bolstered by positive public reaction to the pilot, the team won a major funding grant and set up shop in downtown Bozeman to make the concept real. Initially they planned a one-year series of performances, coupled with tours, informational exhibits and public forums. That has now been bumped up to a two-year schedule, starting in downtown Bozeman in June of 2017 and working downstream to the headwaters of the Missouri by late summer of 2018, culminating in a final crescendo of ceremony to send water on its way to the rest of the country.

An impressive cadre of artists have signed up to take part, attracted by the unique nature of the project, and by the organizers’ hope that WaterWorks might provide a template for similar programs around North America, using art to encourage community conversations. WaterWorks has brought on a communications coordinator, a project coordinator, a logistics and tech person, and has contracted with water specialists to help pull events together. Local scientists, ranchers, politicians and government officials have lent support, and planning the series has been a full-time occupation for the better part of the past year.

NIGHT DEEPENED. The Bear Canyon Drummers began to chant. The song rose and fell to the pounding heartbeat. Sound enclosed the audience, as if we were in a room together walled by song and drumbeat. Then, as the drums faded, images floated against the old, massive buildings.

Towering projections lit the façade of the former grain terminal, moving scenes of rivers and wetlands. Virtual grain poured into the silo, filling it with plenty. Figures and landscapes appeared—people digging ditches, farmers following



horse-drawn plows, trains piercing the frontier. Native people. Settlers. Historic street scenes. Waving fields, laboring ranchers, flowing currents.

A child’s voice recited Indian battles, massacres, treaties, year on year, decade after decade, a toll of events, each triggering images of struggle, of pain, death and battle, of triumph and oppression: The riveting, unbiased power of listening, naming, calling a roll. Through it all ran water—rivers, swamps, springs, water wheels and ditches—the lifeblood of the valley. Children’s voices, native voices, city planners, farmers, citizens, a narrative stitched across time and delivering a cautionary tale about precious water. All of it hewing to the themes of treasured place, change, dislocation, reverence and destruction.

At the heart of it, a question, resonating with everyone in the audience. “What story do we want to be remembered by?”



WaterWorks is a dynamic art project in that it is temporary, interactive and time-sensitive. Choreographer Joanna Haigood is planning a dance opening for WaterWorks at the Bogart Park pavilion in Bozeman, scheduled for June 23-24.

BETWEEN JUNE 16 AND JUNE 30, WaterWorks kicks off with its Upstream events. For two weeks a jury-selected slate of artists, each working in tandem with a scientist, will showcase a series of downtown exhibits along Bozeman's Main Street to highlight water and the issues surrounding Bozeman's headwater location in the Missouri River drainage. Historic walking tours will illuminate the importance of water in Bozeman's past and present.

"1,000 people a day, on average, walk down Main Street," Taylor emphasizes. "These displays will be very visible in storefronts, parks and public spaces."

Joanna Haigood's Zaccho Dance Theatre will highlight

the Upstream opening, on the evenings of June 23 and 24. Haigood has gained international attention for large-scale aerial dance performances in places such as the San Francisco International Airport, where her troop took over part of a terminal with suspended dancers and 350-foot aerial lines to dramatize the theme of “Departures and Arrivals” through American history. Dancers fall off of elevated platforms, zip across open space, and perform pretty spectacular aerial acrobatics during Haigood’s performances.

“I get introduced to a community and what drives it. I’m open to surprise,” said Haigood, during a mid-winter planning visit.

Haigood settled on the Bogart Park Pavilion as the space for her dance performance. The location is adjacent to Bozeman Creek just two blocks from Main Street, offers covered protection and has tremendous potential for aerial choreography highlighting water in metaphor and drama.

“Art has an extraordinary way of disarming people,” claims Haigood. “It opens them to new ideas that ignite curiosity and vision. The conversations that result then need to move toward action.”

And that’s the thornier layer to calculate. Yes, art holds the power to inspire, to inform, to educate, even to disarm, in a way no public meeting, no letter to the editor campaign, no policy

roundtable can. And yet, how do you move from that to discernable effect, specific action, measurable impact?




AT WATERWORKS, the team is planning informational tours, historic presentations, public forums and ongoing discussions that will build on the “disarming” power of the series and promote movement on challenges facing the Gallatin Valley.

As the summer of 2017 continues, several more events will move downstream, featuring different elements of water’s role. It’s a mark of the coordinators’ success that they have marshaled support and cooperation from across the spectrum of liberals and conservatives, rural and urban participants.

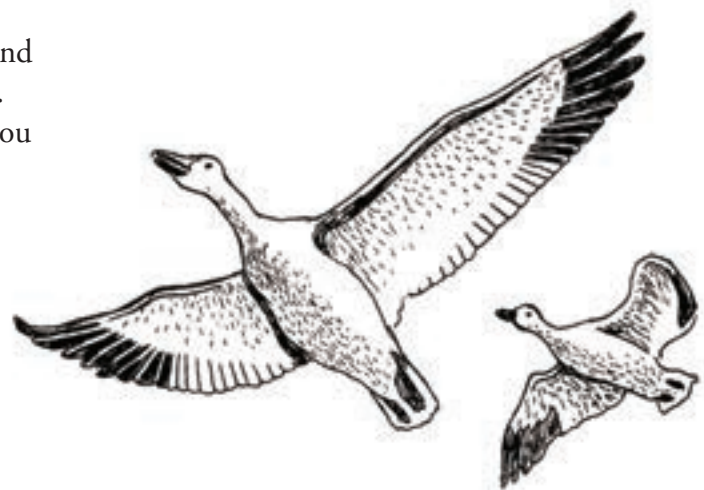
From July 20 to 30, WaterWorks moves its focus to the wetlands near Dry Creek Schoolhouse, between Belgrade and Manhattan along the East Gallatin River. Artist Bently Spang will be featured. Spang’s “War Shirt” display hangs in the Smithsonian in Washington, DC, and his work often extols landscape.

“I was taught as a Northern Cheyenne person to protect the land and to stay connected to it,” Spang says. “There is a code in the symbols of my art, elements like the Morning Star, that refer

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Bently Spang is a Northern Cheyenne and an artist who lives in Billings. He will be presenting at the Dry Creek Schoolhouse, along the East Gallatin River north of Belgrade, on July 21-30. Spang says his art is about place and all of the things that make up that place. The Gallatin Valley, he says, was traditionally a place of peace, where tribes agreed to share the plentiful resources without conflict.

to the natural world. When I look at a landscape, I think about how I would survive in it. It's all here. That's your pharmacy." He points to the native plants. "This is your church," Spang says with a sweeping gesture that takes in the broad, mountain-rimmed expanse. A meadowlark calls from a nearby fencepost.

Dry Creek Schoolhouse goes back to 1901 and is maintained by volunteers. For Spang, the tidy building whispers with history and reminds him of the impact of Indian schools on his people. His WaterWorks exhibit will feature the Warshirt theme and a video production inside the building, coupled with wetland tours on nearby ranchland.

"Conflict is always present in the landscape," Spang continues, as he looks around the interior of the century-old schoolhouse. "Land use, resources, culture—these are timeless concerns. The more we are able to come together as a community in dialogue, the less those tensions will rule us. This valley was a place, traditionally, where people put aside their weapons and took advantage of the plenty all around them."

"We want to encourage people to slow down, be in this place," emphasizes Taylor. "We hope it will make people consider where they live and how they think about the future."

The final event in the 2017 cycle will unfold at the Kelly Ranch, along the old Gabriel Canal in the floodplain of the West Fork of the Gallatin River. During the evenings of August 23–25, history will flicker to life through reenactments produced by Strom across an agricultural tableau using actors and video art. The theme will be irrigation and canals, issues of water rights and the simple yet nuanced engineering involved in spreading water from a river onto fertile fields. Visitors will be invited to walk up to a viewpoint overlooking the irrigation system and take ranch tours.

The Gallatin Valley was known to Indian people as Fat Valley, for the good life it afforded. In more recent times, it has become a mecca for outdoor enthusiasts, tourists, artists, retirees,

businesses and students. Its popularity has made it thrive, but also brings the added challenges of sprawl, rampant growth and burgeoning water use. Taylor and Madden envision producing podcasts around the issues raised by the summer's events, organizing feedback sessions and forums to further discussion, encouraging an expansion of ideas introduced by the series.

Planning is also well underway for the 2018 season, including consideration of a live opera, original musical arrangements, a parade of boats converging at the headwaters, and a culminating celebration at the three rivers confluence to honor and send water on its way to the rest of the continent.

AT THE CLOSE, drumbeats again rose out of the darkness, bouncing off of the old buildings, rolling up the hillsides, filling each of us. Images of landscape and history and sweeping change remained fresh in our thoughts.

The sound faded. No one moved. Night swooped down on us. The distant noise of town and traffic washed back in. We savored the quickened moment, the shared, one-time space, the ephemeral power of image and sound. Then people began to stir, to talk, to share. Many walked away, thoughtful. Headlamps flickered on.

Bicycles and walkers faded into the night, ghostly shadows. I rode back through the quiet, darkened streets, accompanied by neighbors and strangers, overhearing snatches of conversation, or passing in contemplative silence; each of us considering the place we call home, and how, too often, it seems static and unattached to history.

All the way home the fading pulse of drums beat in me, and the swelling pride in this Fat Valley, a place of abundance and peace and long tradition worthy of my care.

What story do we want to be remembered by? Indeed. ■