

## Bozeman, Montana: Too dynamic for a still life

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Bozeman, Mont.—My travels have taken me to many striking U.S. landscapes: the tangled marshes of South Carolina’s barrier islands, the red-rock canyons of southwest Utah, a bare expanse of Nevada desert framed by a purple sunset. But nowhere have I had such a strong impulse to capture the scenery—to take it home with me—as I did on a recent trip to southern Montana.

As I drove to Bozeman, the sky opened up and seemed to unfold until the pale blue stretched forever. Farmland rolled out along the interstate, dotted at tidy intervals with round bales of hay. Knife-edged mountains to the north glowed under a fresh drape of snow; to the south, gentler hills rose and fell in shades of brown.

A thick cloud would cross the mountains, and the luminous scene would turn sharply foreboding. Another gust of wind would send lacy puffs drifting overhead, and the same land would look invitingly mysterious. I dreamed of finding a piece of art that would capture the way this landscape constantly changed, the wild sense of possibility it evoked. So when I got to Bozeman, I started browsing galleries.

### **An Artful Main Street**

Founded in 1864, the town’s Main Street is lined with meticulously restored turn-of-the-last-century buildings. It’s made for strolling—and shoppers and diners of every budget can find something to their liking.

There are college hangouts—an Internet cafe, a pizza joint—and high-concept restaurants such as the popular Plonk, which offers up pricey twists on traditional food, such as a crayfish waffle with key-lime remoulade.

An Army-Navy store sells hunting and fishing gear; a few blocks down, a gourmet fish shop offers sushi-grade salmon. There’s a toy store on Main Street and a cobbler who peddles handmade elk-skin boots for \$240 a pair.



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**Bales of hay dot the landscape along Interstate 90 between Billings and Bozeman, Mont. Many a passerby has the impulse to capture such simple beauty, and many folks find other visual attractions in Bozeman’s eclectic arts community.**

And there are at least 10 galleries.

The galleries offer art of many mediums: oil and watercolor painting, pottery, etching, sculpture, photography. But wander in and out of several of the galleries in an afternoon, and the many offerings soon seem to blend together.

The theme of most works on display could best be described as heroic Old West: giant paintings of stampeding horses, leaping trout, log cabins covered in snow. American Indians, decked out in feathers. Cattle. Sunsets. And, of course, the rugged cowboy: taming a bucking bronco, leaning against a fence, squinting into the sun.

Much of this art, in the style of the late Charles M. Russell, is quite well done; some pieces command more than \$10,000.

Tourists gravitate toward the cheaper versions of this Old West art, much of it produced by artists who live in the area at least part-time.

“They fall in love with the history, the landscape, the people, the culture, and they decide they would like to collect a piece of artwork that’s reflective of the region,” said Curtis Tierney. His East Main Street gallery, Tierney Fine Art, specializes in Western and “sporting” art,



CAROLYN COLE / TPN

**Traditional Old West art, such as this \$13,000 bronze by J.C. Dye, is found at Tierney Fine Art on East Main Street in Bozeman, Mont. Curtis Tierney, left, speaks with a customer.**

including meticulously detailed paintings of fly-fishing and bird-hunting scenes.

I could see the appeal. Problem was, none of it appealed to me.

### **Art from junk**

Eager to check out a more contemporary take on the Montana landscape, I arranged to visit the Bozeman studios of a husband-and-wife team, Terry Karson and Sara Mast.

At first glance, their art seems well-removed from the beauty of Big Sky Country.

Karson works with—well, to put it bluntly, junk. His studio is filled with empty boxes that his friends have salvaged from their trash cans: Pillsbury Fudge Supreme Brownies, Orville Redenbacher popcorn, Marie Callender's potpies.

Much of his work involves creating insects from this garbage: He cuts butterfly shapes from brownie boxes or creates silvery larvae from rolled-up slivers of potato-chip bags—and then pins these trash creatures onto a black background, as for an entomology exhibit.

For another series, Karson cuts the logo from a discarded box into thin rectangles, sands them down until they look like ancient tiles, then reassembles them in a mixed-up order, so the brand name is only barely decipherable.

Karson's been doing this type of work for more than a decade; it grows out of his frustration at what he per-

ceives as a squandering of Montana's environmental treasures. The more he looks out his picture windows at development in the mountains, at the mounds of garbage his neighbors put on the curb, the more his passion for this work grows; he feels compelled to reuse and recycle trash to make a statement about consumerism, materialism and what he sees as pending ecological disaster.

His wife takes her love of Montana in quite a different direction. Mast draws on the view from her studio skylights to create canvases layered with old star charts, gritty red soil and filmy beeswax—melted, spread across the canvas, then scratched, pressed and painted.

“Our work is about the West,” Karson says. “It’s just a new way of looking at it.”

### **Different Visions**

They're far from alone in seeking a different perspective on the landscape. As I soon learned, there's a small but vibrant contemporary arts community in Bozeman, set apart from tourist draws such as the historic downtown.

Jerry Rankin creates abstract paintings rich in the colors and textures he assimilates on his morning hikes with his dog. He may note a patch of crushed grass, shadows stippling the pine needles, a bit of red in a tree, the curve of a mountain path. “I feel the power of being in that environment,” Rankin says.

Contemporary works produced by these and other Montana artists are only occasionally on view—or for sale—in Bozeman. Instead, they show up in the Missoula Art Museum, the Yellowstone Art Museum in Billings, Holter Museum of Art in Helena and the Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art in Great Falls.

But a short walk from Bozeman's downtown, I found a hidden haven for contemporary arts in the Emerson Center for the Arts & Culture.

A blocky brick schoolhouse built in 1918, the Emerson has been converted to a cultural center full of galleries and studios; it also houses a cafe and a small art-house movie theater.

In the lobby, I paused to listen to artist Craig van den Bosch introduce a class of grade-school students to his latest installation, a series of brightly colored acrylic panels that represent human DNA, deconstructed to show the influence of media, technology and the rest of the modern world.



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**Bozeman artist Sara Mast uses layers of wax in her work, some of which looks like cryptic maps.**

Upstairs, I bumped into Dana Aaberg, who uses studio space in the Emerson to paint richly colored works, some abstract, others realistic, like his painting of a wild river tumbling through the Montana woods. “It’s fun stuff,” Aaberg said.

Unlike the images in the Main Street galleries, many of the contemporary paintings I discovered felt alive with the energy of Big Sky Country.

I could hang one of Mast’s canvases in my home and disappear into the wonderfully disorienting geography she creates with wax and dirt. Or I could buy Aaberg’s vibrant painting of two horses, so full of heat and motion I could almost hear them whinny. Any of those paintings

would bring back a part of my Montana experience. But none could capture the way I had felt driving along those endlessly changing mountains, under the huge canvas of baby blue.

Belatedly, I realized the truth: I couldn’t expect any artist to fix that memory for me in paint. It was mine. And it was up to me to hold onto it.

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