A Look at Four Western Galleries

DIVERSE

VIEWS OF THE WEST

by **MICHELE CORRIEL**



The Grand Wrangler | oil on canvas | 36” x 66” | Tracy Stuckey
VISIONS WEST CONTEMPORARY



Vessel Study No. 55 | Paper & Clay | Jennifer Alden
MEDIUM GALLERY



Leader of the Pack | 36” x 36” | Encaustic | Jodie Stejer
STEJER STUDIO

“I paint flowers so they never die.” *–Frido Kahla, Artist*

If, as Frido Kahla once said, “I paint flowers so they never die,” then we can all be assured that our way of life in the West is secured. The artists in this issue portray everything from stark black and white photographs that will grab you unawares, to organic sculptures made of paper clay and threaded wire that seek to communicate the importance of listening to nature, to figurative paintings that herald the importance of the land and ironic portraits of living in the West.

All of the sections in this art feature highlight the works of various artists represented by an assortment of galleries. They will delight, entice, and make you ponder this wondrous region. From living on the land to yelling from the rooftops, these artworks span the range of life in the region. Some artworks in the pages point out the consumer culture we participate in, willingly or not, while others point to ethnological beginnings that have taken root in our daily lives.

One thing is certain, art itself will never die, and within these pages is the living proof.



Vernal, II | oil on linen | 48” x 60” | Morgan Irons OLD MAIN GALLERY & FRAMING

Old Main Gallery

MORGAN IRONS



Toil | oil on linen | 36” x 36” | Morgan Irons

With a focus on local and regional artists, owners Lindsey McCann and Micah Jastram find strength in their commitment to art and keeping Old Main Gallery, a staple of Bozeman’s downtown for over a century, as a relevant part of the art community.

“I’ve thought about the gallery a lot this past year,” McCann says. “My goal is to focus on the local and regional artists. Not necessarily traditional western art, but to allow artists to tell their story and encourage them to create art that needs to be created. That honesty will translate to the viewer.”

A great example of this paying off is the relationship and success of the artist Morgan Irons, who is showing at Old Main Gallery this summer. “I was introduced to her through one of our framing clients,” McCann says. “This was in 2016-17; the client wanted to show me her work. I saw one of her early, larger pieces and I loved it.” McCann asked her if she could stop by the gallery with a few pieces and the two hit it off immediately. “I was impressed with her passion and drive and her ability to connect with the viewer. We took three pieces and sold them within two days.”

Irons’ work revolves around the figure, which is placed within a narrative of agricultural life.

“I work with friends as my models and arrange them in scenes, some are design-focused and some are narrative,” Irons says. “My work is pretty technical, so I typically paint fewer than 20 paintings a year. Last year I only finished six paintings.”

Irons is mostly self-taught, and although she has taken workshops to hone her skills, she really started this new adventure only about seven years ago. She is drawn to the late 19th-century painters, like Jean-François Millet, whose influence on her work comes through in most of her paintings. Millet, one of the founders of the Barbizon school in rural France, was noted for his paintings of peasant farmers, and was the first step in forging the Realism art movement.

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–Lindsey McCann, Co-owner, Old Main Gallery



Verdant Field | oil on linen | 30” x 48” | Morgan Irons

Irons grew up in Idaho with no real access to art, and she didn't know anyone who was an artist. "It wasn't until I moved to Bozeman and started meeting artists that I began to understand what it meant to be an artist," she shares.

She knew she had an aptitude for drawing, and that it felt very natural to her. So, she went out and bought paints, an easel, and canvases and dove right in.

"When I first started painting, I was living on a piece of land and knew I had to limit myself to painting the land I lived on and the people I knew," she says. "I had them dressed in plain clothing – not a lot of patterns – because I didn't want anything distracting." Unintentionally, she created paintings that, at times, appear historical. "Now when I do that it is very intentional," she adds.

Her paintings, taken one at a time or as a whole, come together like a novel, complete with characters, setting, and a bit of mystery. "I continually ask myself what would happen in this world, what's happening down the road," Irons says. "It's always a reaction to what I've already made."

"About two or three times a year I pick my models, one to three people at a time, gather the clothing I want them to wear, and we go out into the fields," Irons explains. "I take tons of photos, and I do studies from life using my travel easel, paying attention to the light and changing colors. Then I go back to the studio making use of all that information."



Curlew's Call | oil on linen | 36" x 48" | Morgan Irons

"It wasn't until I moved to Bozeman and started meeting artists that I began to understand what it meant to be an artist."

–Morgan Irons, Artist

From there, she compiles the parts of her photographs that speak to her and chooses angles and settings that she thinks will work well together. "I often learn things from the landscapes that are identifiable," she says. "For example, I like a flat landscape. The verticalness of the people against the horizon appeals to me."

In her most recent painting, Saint of the Fields, Irons' attention to detail and her depiction of quiet beauty in a noisy world clearly demonstrates her ability to form a narrative within the framework of a portrait. The "saint," half reclining amongst the wheat stalks, looks skyward, her pale skin and simple garb standing out against the earthen tones of the farmed land. An empty woven basket in one hand seems to represent the woman's unfulfilled desires. With a nondescript sky overhead, the viewer feels a yearning, a loneliness, and hears words unsaid, whispered silently in prayers.

"Most of the people who buy my paintings are women and appreciate the softer side of agricultural life," Irons says. "My work is a bit nostalgic, invoking a simpler life. I want people to take a breath. It's accessible work and that's important for me."

For her next series she wants to try a different avenue in her work. "I'm at this point where I am craving some difference," she says. "I've been experimenting with another entry point to that world. I'm thinking about working on a large canvas with just a black line drawing of a figure working in a field, the same subjects and themes, but a different entry point. "

Irons feels fortunate to work with McCann at Old Main Gallery, who offers her the freedom to experiment. "Old Main Gallery gave me a lot of room to grow, and over the last five years I've had three solo shows with my fourth this summer," Irons says. "They've helped a ton."

And in turn, McCann is excited about Irons' new work and about her career as a whole. "She really has a dedicated following," McCann says. "Normally there are a few that have that psychological draw, and with her background in psychology, she is able to play with how she composes each piece, and she really considers the story she's trying to tell. There's intrigue and mystery and just a lot going on there."

According to McCann, Irons' shows are highly anticipated and usually begin to sell before the opening reception. "In the past, I have never really watched an artist grow as much as I have watched Morgan grow," she adds. "I don't usually see her work throughout the year. But every time she does bring in her work after a year of waiting, it's amazing to see her growth and her constant dedication to what she's doing." □



Saint of The Fields | oil on linen | 28" x 40" | Morgan Irons

"My work is a bit nostalgic, invoking a simpler life. I want people to take a breath. It's accessible work and that's important for me."

–Morgan Irons, Artist



Artist Morgan Irons in her studio