Digging Deeper



Above: Bryher Herak examines some of the iron balls used to crush ore by repeatedly tumbling across it



Right: Concrete structures have been given a touch or color for industrial elegance.

BY GABRIEL FURSHONG

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ZUMPANO

On a rainy evening in early June, I switchbacked up a dirt road toward a long cinderblock warehouse that squats 300 feet above the historic mining town of Basin. For decades, employees of the OT Mining Company parked their pickups here, clocked in at the office, and strode down to a towering ball and flotation mill where they crushed and separated ore that came from the Ruby Mine, 14 miles south toward Butte.

On this June occasion, folks from Helena, Boulder, Butte, and even Billings, parked their cars in those same spots, not for a shift of hard labor, but for a poetry reading.

Bryher Herak, who now owns the entire OT Mill property and its remaining buildings, stood just inside the front door of the warehouse ushering guests into an airy reception area and toward several open bottles of wine, a cutting board with snacks, and a plate of maple pecan cookies. Eventually, 40 souls filtered into the performance space at the south end of the building where expansive new windows framed the deep green ridgeline

In the old mining and milling town of Basin, artists work with nature to reclaim an industrial space



of the Boulder Mountains. Just beyond the glass, large transparent textiles printed with the wildflower-bright silhouettes of huge granite boulders fluttered in the breeze, the creations of printmaker Leah Cupino. Inside, three former Montana poets laureate—Tami Haaland, Melissa Kwasny, and M. L. Smoker—prepared to read to the crowd.

"I've been here a few times now, and it's beautiful," said Smoker to begin the evening. "But what really amazes me is how the community always comes out."

Herak, a local entrepreneur, human rights advocate, and co-founder of the Montana Artists Refuge, has long been a catalyst in the Basin community. A week earlier, she offered me a tour of the Art Mine, the name she has given to 23 acres of industrial ruins and copious revegetation that she purchased at a county auction three years ago. As we walked down the terraced hillside from warehouse to rusted ball mill and rambled back up through stands of cottonwood and fir, she marveled at the utility and beauty of each individual thing: the astonishing girth of an ore funnel and the tiny brilliance of mountain lupine blooming along the road.

"Wait until you see this," she said, as we crested a hillock and passed through a copse of mixed pine sprouting up inside a pattern of concrete footings cast with a now-forgotten purpose. Further on, Herak tarried at the mouth of an unfinished concrete corridor, perhaps intended to house a conveyer. Rebar prickled along its interior walls and poked skyward from the top ledges. The 7-foot walls had never been capped, and over many years, rain and sunlight had regrown a narrow grove of baby fir that carpeted the corridor with fallen needles.

Our voices resonated differently after we entered, ricocheting off the walls and returning to us with subtle reverb. "Why does it feel so reassuring to be among ruins?" I asked.

"I don't know," she smiled, her eyes brightening at the question. "Because it's bigger than us, because it goes on past us." And we listened to her voice rounding down the chute.



More than any region of the Treasure State, the Boulder Batholith is known for its material riches. Its thick veins of copper, silver, and gold helped enable an Allied victory in WWII and were the raisons d'etre for Butte, Helena, and a scattering of bustling boomtowns, including Comet, Wicks, and Basin, that had burst into life in the 1860s and mostly fell into ruins long ago.

In 1862, wildcat miners began panning for gold along Cataract and Basin creeks near their confluences with the Boulder River. By 1880, Basin was the commercial center for the Cataract mining district, connected by wagon roads and horse trails to expansive claims with affectionate appellations such as Eva May, Hattie Ferguson, Katy, and Hope. Augustus Heinze, one of Montana's four Copper Kings, invested heavily in milling operations at Basin, driving its population to a peak of 1,500 in the first decade of the 20th century.

No fewer than three hoteliers, three grocers, and 12 saloon keepers competed for a portion of the wages earned by miners, millers, cooks, carpenters, teamsters, landlords, sex workers, welders, and masons. Great Northern and Northern Pacific porters and engineers, too, filled Main Street, hauling passengers and freight into and out of the narrow valley from 1905 to 1909, when Henize abandoned his interests in Basin. Ten years later, a second boom arrived when the Jib Mining Company acquired the Katy-Hope mining works. By extending its tunnels from 3,500 to 15,000 feet in five years, Jib became the largest gold producer in the state by 1924.

The industrial racket and human traffic from any





Above left: A heavy duty truck rim repurposed as sculpture overlooks the hamlet of Basin, Montana.

Right: An ore funnel announces the entrance to The Art Mine.

one of those peak years must have echoed up and down the Boulder River drainage for miles and affronted the ears of deer hunters and trout anglers accustomed to the summer burble of Basin Creek, the spring tumble of Cataract Creek, and their accompanying birdsongs. After its construction in 1950, the OT Mill added to this mechanical din for nearly four decades, churning hundreds of iron balls inside massive cylindrical drums to crush limestone ore into fragments. Then, in 1989, the mill closed, and its colossal components were sold or abandoned.

Today, much of what was left behind remains in the precise location of its abandonment, and these standing losses are integral parts of the place-based magic that Herak, 78, wishes to preserve. "It's the history of Montana," she explained. "You know, my grandfather died of black lung. He worked in the Butte mines, and he died when my mom was 12 years old."

For Herak, there's a clear connection between the value of his labor, which fueled the Allied effort during WWII, and the labor of workers at the OT Mill, which was built, in part, to meet increased demand for metals during the Korean War. For this reason, specifically, and because she believes all history merits close attention, Herak is thoughtful about making art a compatible part of this place, a new chapter rather than a new story.

This vision came into focus when she visited a three-story concrete structure looming above the road that weaves from the frontage road to the warehouse. The angular fortification, part of Herak's property, bewilders passersby because it will forever remain unfinished. As such, it also extends an invitation to imagine possible finishes. Herak and her partner, Kwasny, cautiously accepted that invitation last year when they placed five small planks of color inside five apertures of the bulwark's eastern wall. Small squares of color made to fit empty cubes in a concrete wall, nothing more. Just enough to make a person tilt their head and take a few breaths before wandering down the road.

"This is what it is," Herak said, as we stood debating the difference between industry and art. "Someone might come along someday and take it to another level, but for me right now, this is kind of perfect."

That difference, or indifference, emerged once again when we ran into Sean Sheehan, one of several people Herak has employed to remodel the warehouse and mold its purpose. We found him clad in Carhartt jeans and a thick flannel shirt, hard at work in the north end of the warehouse, which is being converted into studios for wood and metal work, including forging and casting.



Above: The warehouse interior has become home to a variety of artistic endeavors, from poetry and music to painting and printmaking, including these textile boulders by Leah Cupino.

Right: A variety of printing presses are on display.



"It was really cool to write in this setting because it's a conjunction of a lot of different factors that shape this part of Montana. It's beautiful."

When I asked whether the studio would be designed to meet practical or artistic ends, Sheehan jumped at the opportunity to test my assumptions. "Well, in my mind," he said, "I don't see the distinction." He gestured toward a 20-foot-tall steel frame that he's built onto the warehouse, which will eventually shelter the woodshop. "Is that art or is that practical?"

Indeed, it was easy to imagine those steel bones at home on the green lawn of an art institute in some coastal city, children playing among its long, strong, and skinny legs while their parents read an interpretive plaque. "I think of it as functional art," he continued, suggesting that welders and jewelry makers exist on the same spectrum, just like timber framers and makers of fine furniture. "It's a broad, vast field [and] we're just trying to make a little corner of it."

THE POETS LAUREATE READING WAS ONE OF MANY free events hosted by the Art Mine over the last year, including several world-class jazz performances booked by Herak's neighbor M. J. Williams, an internationally renowned jazz composer, vocalist, and trombonist, and the recipient of a Governor's Arts Award from the Montana Arts Council.

After the reading, listeners mingled in the reception area at the center of the warehouse, which daylights as a printmaking studio. Just days before, its tables and shelves were covered with prints of pine boughs and chickadees created by Jason Clarke, an adjunct professor at the University of Montana.

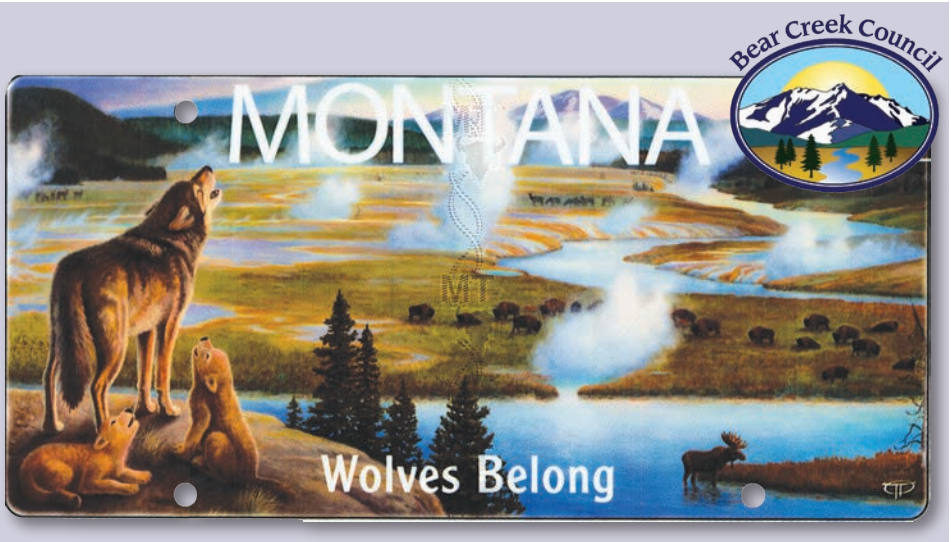
Near the kitchen, I ran into Grant Fairbrother, a musician and writer from Helena who had participated in the full-day workshop with Kwasny and Haaland that preceded the reading. When I asked what it was like to learn and write at the Art Mine, he mentioned a rainy walk the poets led around the property that morning.

"It was really cool to write in this setting because it's a conjunction of a lot of different factors that shape this part of Montana. It's beautiful," he said, "but you also have the legacy of the extractive industry. You also have the legacy of the degradation of the environment that goes along with that, and it's all mixed up with the resilience of nature."

He described the mysterious concrete foundations, pylons, and rebar mingling with lodgepole and fir upslope from the ball mill, which reminded him of *Stalker*, a 1979 film by Andrei Tarkovsky. In that scientific fantasy, a strange man guides two clients across a wasteland, where something catastrophic has occurred, toward a restricted area known as the Zone.

"There's industrial decay and wildlife reasserting themselves, all happening at the same time," he explained, recalling the film. A place similar to the Art Mine. A place where we can notice our smallness and see how living things go on past us.

"The Art Mine sparks your imagination," Fairbrother continued. "It portends a futuristic scenario in which nature is reclaiming everything around it."



Acknowledge *your* support for the ecological and economic value of wolves in Montana

CHOOSE THIS PLATE DESIGN WHEN YOU REGISTER YOUR VEHICLE

Bear Creek Council, grassroots at its best since 1983, sponsors this catchy license plate design. We are community leaders, business owners, and nature lovers working to protect our public lands and iconic wildlife.

License plate artwork by Monte Dolack

Watercolor Landscapes

MonteHurlbert.com
MonteLeArt@gmail.com
(406) 587-8976

