State of the Arts • Fall 2018

Expression and engagement abundant in Montana

I had an inspiring visit with the founders of Mountain Time Arts, a new grantee of the Montana Arts Council. With a mission to “enliven our relationships to… history, culture, and environment,” Mountain Time Arts (MTA) has produced a thoughtful array of site-specific performances that spotlight issues central to Montanans. It was a lively conversation saturated from aesthetics to the environment, to civic engagement. I left impressed with MTA’s practice to empower scholars, scientists and artists to engage with their community and inspire deep thinking.

Art can counteract divisions
My conversation with MTA was still fresh when I heard Marc Mortal, the president of the National Urban League, speak at the Montana Shakespeare in the Parks performance in the Wild in Lincoln. In the handful of times that I have visited this season, I’ve been struck by how differently visitors interact with the park. Some have the reverence seen in museums, carefully reading the markers and studying the art. Others, like my children, bound along the trail, as enamored by the setting as the sculptures. I’ve only seen evidence of the next type: those inspired to leave their mark in stacks of rocks, balanced sticks, and arranged leaves. Sculpture in the Wild bridges the environment, art, and history in a way that makes every visitor comfortable.

Each of these organizations engages outside of the usual art venues, with atypical audiences, who are authentically engaged. MTA is proud to nurture an environment that inspires expression and results in connections.

I’ll end with this quote by Herbert Mar- cuse: “Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world.”

What Montanans say about the arts (from page 1)

Montanans believe the arts provide more meaning to their lives and make their communities better places to live than does the average American (64 percent); 89 percent say the arts should be taught in the elementary, middle, and high schools; 91 percent believe the arts should be taught in the classroom; 89 percent of Americans believe the arts “unify our communities,” 73 percent agreeing that the arts “help us understand other cultures.”

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What Americans say about the arts in 2018

Four-in-ten adults in Montana think federal spending per person on the arts organizations is not enough (42 percent). Most adults in Montana disagree with the government eliminating the National Endowment for the Arts, including 41 percent who strongly disagree.

What Americans say about the arts (from page 1)

• People in Montana are more likely to be personally involved in artistic activities as arts makers (62 percent) than American adults nationally (47 percent).

• Montanans are especially likely to agree that the arts are a form of pure pleasure when they experience or participate in them (73 percent), and 72 percent believe that the arts help them understand other cultures better.

• Seven percent of Montanans believe the arts help students perform better academically; 61 percent believe that the arts improve health and the healthcare experience; and 47 percent believe that the arts are helpful to military personnel transitioning back to civilian life.

• Six-in-ten Montanans agree that creativity enhances success in the workplace (61 percent). Six-in-ten Montanans also say their job requires them to be creative—either individually or as part of a team—and come up with ideas that are new or unique (61 percent).

• In Montana, there is consensus when it comes to how the arts impact tourism, with about nine-in-ten adults in agreement that the arts attract travelers and are good for tourism (86 percent).

• Three-quarters of Montanans residents agree that the arts have a social impact and improve the quality and livability of their communities (74 percent vs. 71 percent nationally).

Inspirating expression and connection in Montana

Montana’s Shakespeare in the Parks was honored with a Governor’s Arts Award in 1991, for their commitment to Montana. In Helena, where I live, their visits are so valued that the community fundraises to have two performances. Kindness and courtesy were everywhere as we negotiated close quarters, filling every possible space. The library lawn, blanketed with people, was near silent as the actors used unfamiliar words to tell the most recognizable stories. I tracked the people who happened upon the performance and lingered to take it in. It was a magical evening, and I left feeling grateful for the experience.

I had similar thoughts in the very different environment of Blackfoot Pathways: Sculpture in the Wild in Lincoln. In the handful of times that I have visited this season, I’ve been struck by how differently visitors interact with the park. Some have the reverence seen in museums, carefully reading the markers and studying the art. Others, like my children, bound along the trail, as enamored by the setting as the sculptures. I’ve only seen evidence of the next type: those inspired to leave their mark in stacks of rocks, balanced sticks, and arranged leaves. Sculpture in the Wild bridges the environment, art, and history in a way that makes every visitor comfortable.

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