

'Invisible Prairie' invites viewers on multi-sensory exploration

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June 21, 2023



Laurel Sparks explores the history of her family, the Lehrkinds, in mixed media installation "Settler Séance." The piece is part of "Invisible Prairie," an exhibition on display through Oct. 14 at Tinworks Art in Bozeman. [Rachel Hergett, for the Chronicle](#)

On a recent tour of the new Tinworks Art exhibition, curator Melissa Ragain invited people to picture a landscape painting. In the European tradition, these idyllic scenes probably have a mountain and a pond and possibly a deer or two. But what if we take mountains out of the equation?

For many people, Ragain explained, "The plains are not a landscape. They're hostile and they're empty and they're scary."

"Invisible Prairie" leans into the idea that these spaces can be rich and full of life — if one is willing to take a closer look. The exhibition features works by A.K. Burns, Abby Flanagan, Suzanne Kite, Tracy Linder, Julie Ann Nagle, Layli Long Soldier, Laurel Sparks and Jeff Rice in a

variety of mediums. It runs through Oct. 14 at Tinworks, with a variety of accompanying artistic, educational, and community programs.

"It's such an exciting way to learn about a new place and a sense of place," said Jenny Moore, Tinworks Art's new director, who moved to Bozeman from far-west Texas two weeks before the opening.

In curation, Ragain was inspired in part by Nancy Holt's 1972 installation "Missoula Ranch Locators: Vision Encompassed," in which the artist installed steel pipes as viewfinders, directing how people interact with portions of the landscape.

"What that work was about was trying to orient herself in a space that had no visible landmarks and feelings were unmoored," Ragain said.

"Invisible Prairie" visitors are first greeted with a mostly blank wall sporting the exhibition title and an explanatory blurb. Like the prairie, it doesn't give much away at first glance.

"The eight artists in this show counter the idea of the prairie as an empty place," the text reads. "They forgo traditional landscapes, instead depicting the Plains as an environment rich in sensory experiences and cultural heritage."

Facing the wall is Nagle's "A Seed to Eat the World," a kaleidoscope filled with objects such as a coyote jawbone, bees and even baby teeth that speak to the richness of the landscape and its inhabitants. The artist routinely switches out the objects, so there is often something new to discover. While Nagle often works in sculptural forms, her contributions to "Invisible Prairie" also include large-scale paintings. Viewers are given blacklight flashlights to highlight phosphorescent paint and bring out details — mainly insects and flowers hiding among the grasses.

In the next room, Oglála Lakota artist Kite, who uses only her last name for her artwork, showcases the star knowledge and graphic language of the Lakota and other peoples through embroidered hides and rock pictographs. Her piece "Iron Road," in collaboration with Corey Stover and Becky Red Bow, uses these pictographs to tell the story of Elizabeth Iron Road, Kite's great-great grandmother who escaped the Wounded Knee Massacre on foot. It is accompanied by a video that both tells the story and helps the viewer "read" the stones on the floor.

Kite will debut a new piece at the close of "Invisible Prairie" on Oct. 14, which intentionally coincides with the date of the next solar eclipse. The piece interprets a similar graphic myth as a musical score, with players starting on the outskirts and working their way toward the center in time with the eclipse.

New York artist Sparks is the great, great granddaughter of Julius Lehrkind, who opened a brewery in Bozeman in 1895. Her installation, "Settler Séance" digs into her genealogy, interpreting individual family members from four generations who lived in or frequented the nearby Lehrkind Mansion as mixed-media pieces.

Other explorations of the prairie include a 13-minute video of the 2017 total solar eclipse, filmed in Nebraska. Burns used 16mm film to capture the event on a medium that is naturally reactive to light. Burns' other work uses found objects and mirrored glass to reflect both inner and outer worlds.

Inside the Tinworks space dotted with light from Chris Fraser's "Asterisms," created in 2019, Linder's phonetically titled "/weTHer/," invokes both "weather" and "whether." The piece uses 300 found bovine ribs in a 64-foot sculpture mimicking "swirls of wind, whirling clouds, and lightning strikes on the prairie," according to the Tinworks website. It also speaks to the loss of grasslands, to the skeletons of the prairie environment she once knew due to drought and other factors.

Outside, Long Soldier's "Day Poems: Sun Mirrors" explore language in both written and visible forms and Flanagan's "tracts" and other works look at materials from specific sites, namely the Fort Logan Blockhouse and Tinworks itself.

"Invisible Prairie" especially digs into senses beyond vision in an installation by Rice. "Hidden Soundscapes" invites people to step into another world.

"It's so compelling," Moore said.

Grasses and other plants hanging from the ceiling bring the scent of the prairie to the nose, while recordings that Rice captured in plains environments for the Acoustic Atlas sound archive — sandhill cranes, a bison herd, a wildfire and a rainstorm among them — ring in the ears through multiple speakers.

"There's just so many elements to this 30 minute mix," Rice said over the barking of prairie dogs from the speakers. "Every one of these recordings has a different story to it. I could talk for hours about it, but maybe it's good to just listen."

"Invisible Prairie" is on display at Tinworks Art, 719 N. Ida Ave. in Bozeman, through Oct. 14. The exhibition is open to the public on Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sundays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Admission is free.

For more information and a full schedule of events, visit www.tinworksart.org.