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ARTS

SPOTLIGHT: ERIK 'OLE' NELSON



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 Artist Erik "Ole" Nelson won a Montana Arts Council commission with the designs for "Emergence," a 32-foot welded-steel sculpture placed on Missoula College's new River Campus. PHOTO BY ERIN CHAMBERLAIN

Illuminating the streets of Bozeman

By Sarah Gianelli *EBS Associate Editor*

BOZEMAN – Erik “Ole” Nelson recently completed the most challenging commercial project of his career—the reconstruction of the historic Rialto theater marquee in downtown Bozeman for Thinktank Design Group.

A year in the making, the marquee was stripped of its plywood façade just days before the venue’s first private event on Jan. 13, and now brazenly lights up Main Street with its art deco-inspired, mirrored-chrome and red-neon glory.

But while the Rialto’s imminent reopening may be getting all the press, 2017 also saw the completion of Nelson’s most ambitious work of fine art—a 32-foot welded-steel “tree” commissioned by Montana Arts Council for Missoula College’s new River Campus. Although “Emergence” is twice as large as any of his previous sculptures, it’s easily recognizable as made by the same hand as the dynamic, organic forms that reside at Bozeman’s library and City Hall.

Nelson, known almost exclusively as “Ole,” got his nickname in college at Montana State University when he told a fellow Wisconsin “cheesehead” a litany of corny, Scandinavian “Ole and Lena” jokes.

In 1995, while completing his Bachelor of Fine Arts in graphic design and sculpture, Nelson and a friend purchased Murphy’s Signs and Graphics and set up shop in industrial north Bozeman.

Nelson has since bought out his partner, moved his company Media Station Design Works to the other side of town, and left his mark all over downtown Bozeman. He restored the iconic Hotel Baxter sign, designed the Community Food Co-op’s logo and fabricated its signage, and is responsible for countless other projects that have defined the look of high profile businesses, including Plonk, Copper and Bozeman Brewing Company.

But Nelson said in his 23 years of creating signage, he’s never worked on a project so large it required 500 feet of neon, and blocking out a lane of traffic to accommodate a 40-ton crane.

“This is a once in a lifetime project,” Nelson said, explaining how he created the design from 1920s photos of the original Rialto marquee, and collaborated with two experts in neon and chrome to bring the computer-generated plans to three-dimensional life. “As far as design and scale, and what [Thinktank] is doing to bring that building back to its historic grandeur ... it’s pretty epic. I’m overwhelmed with gratitude that I was able to be a part of it.”

Nelson believes that commercial signage can be as powerful as fine art—if it can transcend its advertising component—but his true passion is in creating public sculpture.

Nelson’s artistic aspirations began to gain momentum when he submitted a sculpture to Gallatin Art Crossing’s annual call for public art. “FishFace” won the 2010 People’s Choice Award, earning it a permanent home in Bozeman’s Soroptimist Park and in GAC’s collection. Committing himself to enter a sculpture each year, he won the People’s Choice Award again in 2015 with “DayDreamer,” now situated at City Hall, and today Gallatin Art Crossing has five of Nelson’s works on loan.

Nelson’s process typically begins with intuitive freehand drawings that are scanned into a computer, sized to scale, and cut out on a plasma table.

This requires an ability to think in three-dimensions, something Nelson has had a knack for since he was a child. Not only is this a satisfying mental puzzle, but it's also part of what intrigues him about sculpture in general.

"When you build it in three dimensions, now it has this other life to it," Nelson said. "If you look at it [from one angle] you may still see the two-dimensional shape, but if you turn slightly you see the other dimension. Every time you take a different perspective, something new emerges—that combined with the abstract imagery makes it feel like there are endless possibilities [within a single sculpture]."

Nelson's sculptures contain a tension between many polarities. The curvilinear forms are abstract, but conjure visions of dancers, Piscean fish, limbs and branches. They are organic and fluid, suggestive of wood, but are made out of one of the world's strongest, most unyielding metals. The positive and negative space are in dialogue with one another, but each tell their own story.

"I think [public art] is probably one of the most accessible forms of art," Nelson said, explaining why he appreciates that component of his work. "Being outside in the elements, and the amount of change that happens with weather and light ... it's like every time you go to see the same piece—in a different season, a different time of day, a different mood—you're going to see something different."

Take a stroll through downtown Bozeman or visit olenelson.com to see more of the artist's work.