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ARTWORKS



ERIK NELSON
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Erik 'Ole Nelson

BY MASON RIDDLE

Erik Nelson fabricates big, outdoor welded steel sculptures that are monumental in stance yet lyrical in feel. Their abstract, curvilinear forms, some of which rise to more than thirteen feet in height, reveal Nelson's keen eye for the critical relationship between positive and negative space. Their weathered surfaces boast a rich red-brown hue and give a textural weight to their already substantial presence.

Working largely as a public artist, Nelson's towering steel sculptures spice up the streetscape of Bozeman, Montana, where he has lived since 1991. Known as Ole, he has worked closely since 2008 with the non-profit Galatin Art Crossing (GAC), an art-on-loan program managed by the county of Galatin, MT. Each year the GAC purchases a sculpture to place permanently, selecting one from a field of ten to twenty works on view throughout the city of 40,000. They have four of Nelson's.

Nelson's restrained *FlameDance* graces the Bozeman library property and his compositionally complex *DayDreamer* greets government workers and visitors to City Hall. Through the GAC program, Nelson was commissioned to design and create an informational kiosk, sited in Bozeman's popular Sir Optimist Park. Columnar in form and polychromed in hues of a deep plum and bronze, the kiosk incorporates a text panel with pertinent city information and wooden bench that extends outward like a wing. Nelson's, *SailTree* and *CloudRacer*, enliven public sites in the city of Sheridan, Wyoming.

Nelson's artistic practice is heir to numerous formal ideas and

notions that define 20th Century abstract art. His work reinforces that a painting or sculpture can be non-representational but still express emotional and psychological states, or project a unique way of perceiving spatial relationships. He lists David Smith, Alexander Calder and Richard Serra as influences in their use of materials and sophisticated understanding of form. He also marvels at the work of Louise Nevelson. He cites the "graphic aspects" of the work of such 20th century luminaries as Picasso, Rauschenberg, Warhol, Rosenquist and Basquiat as important to his practice. "Their works have this intangible quality," he explains. "It's that mysterious quality, the more you look, the more you see – it's an unspoken thing."

Conceptually, Nelson embraces how his sculptures move effortlessly from appearing as a relatively flat object into being 3-dimensional, depending on where the viewer is standing. He appreciates the visual play between a work being inert and animated.

Nelson's creative process is organic but straightforward. He designs and fabricates his sculpture in his Bozeman studio/sign shop, Media Station

Design Works that is outfitted with a CNC router and CNC plasma table. He first draws the sculpture's image, an intuitive process, which is then scanned into the computer where he "cleans it up." Using a jump drive and a plasma table, he then cuts – or "exudes" the form from 1/8 inch-thick steel plate. He then hand-welds the piece together using angle iron as a framework. The surface is then ground and finished by hand.

"I like the fact that my work originates as a hand drawing and moves into the computer and then back to hand welding, shaping, grinding and finishing," says Nelson. "It's laborious but a good way to be creative."

Nelson's sculptures clearly capture the gestural quality of his drawings. Although static, his sculptures are informed by a dynamism that makes them visually active rather than passive works. The works are also associative, even at times narrative in their expression, allowing the viewer to bring his or her thoughts to the piece. *CloudRacer* and *SailTree* suggest both specific objects and action, whether it is the racing of clouds or the sails of a boat. His more figurative *FlameDance*, measuring over twelve-feet in height, suggests a male and female in a deep, sensual embrace.

"I have been particularly drawn to the human form over the last couple of years," says Nelson. "It's been a major focus. I just start drawing without too much of a plan, and see what emerges from the process. I let the drawing speak to me as it evolves."

Taking an atypical path from most artists, Nelson migrated from the world of commercial art to the world of fine art. A native of Madison, Wisconsin, Nelson moved to Bozeman, Montana where he received his B.F.A. in Graphic Design from Montana State University in 1995, with an emphasis on sculpture.

While in college, Nelson took sculpture courses and was particularly interested in working with metal. In 1993 Rijline Metal Art hired him to

hand-torch small metal objects and accessories such as elk, bear and moose. They once received an order for 2,000, Ducks Unlimited Weather Vanes. At Rijline, Nelson honed his freehand plasma torching, welding and finishing skills. He also managed the transition of Rijline's art production process from freehand to computer-assisted design. He also learned to transform his drawings into 3-dimensional computer designs and mastered the CNC plasma cutting equipment.

In 1995, Nelson and a friend bought a Bozeman sign fabrication shop where they designed and fabricated logos and signage for local businesses. Now called Media Station Design Works, Nelson became the sole owner in 2000. Like at Rijline, the sign business provided him with technical training

and the skills to run a business. It has also given him experience dealing with clients, an important aspect in the public art world. It has also been a welcome means of support.

Although Nelson continues to design and fabricate signs, his goal is to do less sign business and more public art. "I've learned that the whole process, from conception to fabricating the final sculpture is more fulfilling," he comments. "It is where my heart is these days." When asked if he is going to stay in Bozeman, some 25 years after arriving, he responds, "Well, I am building a house one block off of Main Street, where I will install sculptures along the street. I also plan to create a small sculpture garden next to the house. Yeah, I guess I am."

[www.olenelson.com](http://www olenelson.com)

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(previous page) **FlameDance**
welded steel, 12.5ft. x 51in. x 8in., 2013

(top) **CloudRacer**
welded steel, 10.5ft. x 6.5ft. x 4in., 2013

(bottom) **Elemental Spirit**
welded steel maquette, 27 x 12 x 12in., 2014

(right) **FishFace**
welded steel, 13ft. x 4ft. x 8in., 2014