Landscape and artistry converge on a creative pilgrimage to Montana.
Inverted Portal
Ensemble Studio

Previous photo: Tippet Rise Art Center co-founder Peter Halstead calls the 400-ton “Inverted Portal” a gate, sundial, wormhole, or window. The monumental sculpture made of earth, rock, cement, grass, and rebar is one of eight artworks set in a 10,260-acre working ranch at the foot of Montana’s Beartooth Mountains.

Below and right: Dougherty constructed “Daydreams” of willow saplings woven within and atop a replica of a prairie schoolhouse. The sculpture “celebrates ideas of wistful escape,” writes Dougherty, “and indulges bucolic fantasies of nature as headmaster and the wind as a learning aid.”
current of sound runs through my bones. Mallet in hand, I stand inside the scaffolding of a massive steel sculpture, on a grassy hilltop, in the middle of nowhere, which feels, right now, like the center of the universe. Artist Mark di Suvero equipped his installation “Beethoven’s Quartet” with mallets almost as a challenge: how wild do I dare to be?

There are no plaques describing this solitary sculpture. Why Beethoven? There is no explanatory information but the art itself, the wind, and the deep drum-like roar that will be heard only if I strike the metal again and make it. It’s up to me to roar that will be heard only if I strike the metal again and make it. It’s up to me to create this moment, or to let it drift away.

Is it really OK to be this loud? Is it even OK to be here?

Yes. It’s very OK.

The sentiment comes to me with clarity, just as many others will this weekend, out here in this Montana expanse that is the weirdest, wildest, windiest, and most wonderful combination of nature and art, of shared music and private moments, of impossible structures tracked in, hauleled up, built on-site, and in some cases literally created from the earth below my feet—all seemingly dropped from the sky.

Wrapping up its third season, Tippet Rise Art Center, set on a 10,260-acre cattle and sheep ranch with the Beartooth Mountains fringing the horizon, is one of the newest of the world’s burgeoning outdoor cultural centers. But it’s already drawing some of the leading lights of modern art and classical music to the mostly unknown, unincorporated little community of Fishtail, Montana.

I’m here to spend the weekend immersed in art and music, and to see if doing so in the outdoors, isolated from my daily rhythms, makes a difference.

Will it sprinkle some sort of magic dust over me—or will I just get dusty?

**AT FIRST** it looks like a monster bison grazing in the yellow rolling hills. But it is neither bison nor mythical Minotaur. It’s a massive, humped, and spiky sculpture called “Two Discs” made by Alexander Calder in 1965. It spent six years in front of the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum in my hometown of Washington, D.C. Now it’s here, out of context, freed, set out to pasture, and shape-shifting—not always benevolently—as I move toward and then past it.

I learn that Tippet Rise is unlike any art gallery I’ve ever been to. You don’t take steps between the artworks; you traverse miles of gravel roads and connecting trails, your view of each piece changing with your distance from it. What looks like a lonely sentinel from afar becomes, up close, a playful giant offering shade. Nothing is what it appears to be, and at first it all seems too big to absorb.

There is “Beartooth Portal,” a monumental sort of clamshell that in the hazy air serves as a curious druid beacon, made by an artistic architectural group called Ensamble Studio. There is “Satellite #5: Pioneer,” a giant wood and steel installation by Stephen Talasnik that seems equal parts knotted wooden rollercoaster and space satellite, fallen to this stretch of Montana that the artist has spoken about in unearthy terms: “The topography of Tippet Rise is reminiscent of the lunar surface, as seen in the early black-and-white images captured by NASA satellites, an expansive infinite panorama that served as a staging area for exploration and adventure.”

Now coiled out here, among the tall grass and snakes, this fallen satellite raises more questions than answers and looks as out of place as I feel. But I find that I like feeling out of place. There is, however, logic in the design, as I learn later from Tippet founders Peter and Cathy Halstead. For one, the remote installations—made by architects and artists you’d see in top museums around the world—each got their own canyon, hill, glade, or natural amphitheater as a frame. The eight pieces out on the working ranch’s grazing lands also serve as cairns, way stations both fanciful and practical to help you on your journey, whether it’s by foot, bike, van, or in your head. And it turns out several of the pieces are purposely meant to feel as if taken from the sky. Their map on the land is a mirror image of the stars, Cathy tells me, “as if you took the constellation Orion and brought it down to Earth.”

_**DWARFED, STANDING IN THE BREEZE**_ that runs like a river through “Inverted Portal,” I run my hand along the smooth side of this 26-foot-high installation that was literally cast into, filled...
in, then removed from the earth and set upright with tractors and cranes. It’s cool to touch, perhaps one reason why the Tippet Rise concert stage is a solid slab of granite. One of the slabs can be measured in hundreds of thousands of pounds, one side of which, as my guide (and Tippet director of opera- tions) Pete Hinmon calculates, weighs about the same as “400 grand pianos.”

Aside from the cows, there are other visiting luminaries from the animal kingdom: elk, deer, bunnis, eagles, sandhill cranes, and meadowlarks, to name a few. A group of students from Montana State University is also touring today, and when I see them later their faces are marked with dark charcoal-colored streaks; inspired, they had dipped their fingers in the rough sides of the primal sculptures.

At “Domo,” a massive rock structure also made by Ensemble Studio, the silence is punctuated only by a sort of ghostly casta-net orchestra of grasshoppers. Hinmon tells me how a cellist who performed here once said that he “loved the accompaniment of the grasshoppers—if only they’d keep time!”

I notice two hikers, the next closest gallery viewers, walking toward us on a distant trail. I know they have pianos concert ways up here, and I ask how they get Steinway grands up this hill of grass, brush, and gravel. The answer: very carefully, of course, with the help of a rough-terrain dolly set on inflatable tires and five or six people pushing the piano, on its side, up the hill.

This is the kind of wonder that the idea of a pianist who works here—the weight of a grand piano is a perfectly legit unit of measurement. It’s the Middle of the Day on “campus” and I stroll into the music barn where a small army of sound specialists is tinkering with the microphones above a glistening black, bison-size Steinway piano. I quickly learn that for people who live and perform here mostly outdoors and with guests driven up the gravel roads in wooden walls like mist. This level of skill is now stopping me in my tracks, choking my throat, making it hard for me to see the music venue, called the Olivier Barn, for the evening concert, by pianist Jenny Chen. We sit in folding director’s chairs, and I notice the informal dress code: fleece, checked shirts, sweatshirts, hiking boots, cowboy boots, Tevas, and Birkenstocks.
“Domo” may seem like an object from prehistory, but the 1,200-ton structure was made of earth and stone by Ensamble Studio, of Madrid and Boston. In an inverted lost-wax process, the material was poured into the land, then excavated by bulldozers. With a ceiling designed for superior acoustics, the work also serves as a concert venue. “In these preternatural settings,” writes Peter Halstead, “some primal chord is struck inside us.”
While artworks sprawled across 50 miles in the Coachella Valley, the free and open-to-all Desert X biennial (February 9-April 12) encouraged visitors to journey to discover the various sites. Each work engages with the specific cultural and geographic landscapes of the desert. Nearby, the Joshua Tree National Park April 12-14.

**STOIKIN VALLEY, NY**
The 500 pastoral acres of Storm King Art Center hold 500-500 sculptures and installations that change, president John Stern told the New York Times as its landscape evolves.” Visitors hike, bike, or ride through various sites. Each work engages with the specific cultural and geographic landscapes of the desert. Nearby, the Joshua Tree National Park April 12-14.

**STOIKIN VALLEY, NY**
The 500 pastoral acres of Storm King Art Center hold 500-500 sculptures and installations that change, president John Stern told the New York Times as its landscape evolves.” Visitors hike, bike, or ride through various sites. Each work engages with the specific cultural and geographic landscapes of the desert. Nearby, the Joshua Tree National Park April 12-14.

**STOIKIN VALLEY, NY**
The 500 pastoral acres of Storm King Art Center hold 500-500 sculptures and installations that change, president John Stern told the New York Times as its landscape evolves.” Visitors hike, bike, or ride through various sites. Each work engage...
Talasnik named this work, made of yellow cedar logs and slats, for the satellite launched in 1973 to view the dark side of the moon. “When art is freed from the four walls of a museum and from the confines of a city,” write the Halsteads, “suddenly it relates to the world in a way that enriches the landscape.”