



The Coolest Place in America to See Art and Listen to Music

By William O'Connor

Yahoo!

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Tippet Rise has become the ultimate art and music trip for those in the know.

Creator of [Getting Around with William O'Connor](#)



Wendy Red Star, *The Soil You See...*, 2023, Photo by James Florio. Tippet Rise Art Center.

The hills of Montana are alive, quite literally, with the sound of music.

That's because for the last few days, hundreds of lucky travelers have gathered on the eastern foothills of the Beartooth Mountains to listen to pieces by Vivaldi, Angélica Negrón, Copland, and more performed by some of the top musical talent in the world.

It's all part of a feat that takes place over the course of five weekends at the end of every summer in a fantasy land of giant sculptures and unique pavilions set in a 12,500 acre ranch in Montana known as [Tippet Rise](#).

**POLSKIN
ARTS**



Trilogy by Louise Nevelson

Founded by the philanthropists Cathy and Peter Halstead in 2016, it's simultaneously one of the most original places I've ever been and the apogee of decades of creative creations by the wealthy in this country meant to give back and inspire. At the risk of sounding too earnest or corny, it's also the coolest.

The ranch is criss-crossed by 15 miles of trails and 14 miles of road that allow visitors to discover not only the striking works of art cleverly situated throughout but also explore the canyons, hills, and vistas that encompass this land. There are works by Alexander Calder, Patrick Dougherty, Louise Nevelson, Ensemble Studio, Alexander Liberman, Wendy Red Star, Richard Serra, Mark di Suvero, Ai Weiwei, Francis Kéré, and, most recently, Ursula von Rydingsvard. Almost all are colossal in some way, the exception being Wendy Red Star's *The Soil You See*. That powerful work obtains its heft from the subject matter (shaped like a fingerprint, it records the names of the Crow chiefs who signed treaties with the U.S. government and often used an X or fingerprint to sign).

The art here is mammoth because the land is undeniably so.

"There's so much art that we love," Cathy, who is also an abstract painter, explains to me, "But that wouldn't feel like it belongs here. I mean, this land is so big, it's powerful, it's kind of primitive in some way. And for the work to feel it's creating some kind of connection, and not being overwhelmed by the land," it needed to hold its own against that big sky.



The Inverted Portal, Ensemble Studio (Antón García-Abril and Débora Mesa). Photo by Kevin Kinzley. © Tippet Rise Art Center.

Only roughly 160 a day can come and see these works starting in June, either by signing up for a hiking/biking ticket or for the guided tour. I have strong feelings that I've expressed in previous columns about art foundations and public access, so I was unsure what I thought about such a limited number. What I found on the ground was that while I thought the vastness meant that surely more could come, instead, that vastness meant any more visitors would completely alter how you experience the way they've created this place.

Intentionality or doing something with intention in art is one of those consultant-y/academia phrases that sounds like nails on a chalkboard, but there was a method to the Halsteads' madness here. The sculptures have been laid out such that each is its own interaction with nature, and other people popping into your experience would be akin to a clattering fork in the dining hall of a silent retreat.

When you "see the sculptures, it's a kind of Alice in Wonderland. It's through the rabbit hole," explains Peter, who is this ebullient Richard-Attenborough-in-*Jurassic-Park* type. "You're going through the portals, you're going through, like to Narnia."

Some, like Ai Weiwei's *Iron Tree* or Ensemble's *Beartooth Portal*, seem a natural part of the landscape here, while others, like Liberman's shiny red-orange *Archway II*, get their power from contrast with nature. I found von Rydingsvard's *Bronze Bowl with Lace* particularly attention-grabbing, the various shades of rust covering its undulating sides a warped mirror of the mid-August landscape. And Patrick Dougherty's *Daydreams*, in which twisting, woven willow branches whirl their way from the top of a one-room schoolhouse and onto the ground near an aspen grove, is singularly startling at dusk.



The Domo concert venue by Ensemble

If Tippet Rise was solely about remarkable sculptures set in a jaw-dropping slice of nature—a sort of Mountain West Storm King Art Center—it would be a notable addition to the world of art foundations alongside Glenstone, the Louisiana, the Menill, and more. But what truly sets it apart is the music.

There are four music venues at the art center that are utilized in the final five weeks of summer. The first is the Olivier Music Barn, an acoustic jewel box blending the Music Room in the Esterházy Palace of Hungary (used by Joseph Haydn for composition) and the Snape Maltings Concert Hall in the UK. It's encased in a rust-colored barn—a nod on the part of the Halsteads to their Montana neighbors who, the couple tells me, originally thought the couple were going to build all kinds of monstrosities on this land.

The other three are outdoors. There's the Geode, which is a series of triangular structures with views of the mountains. The second is the Tiara Acoustic Shell, which they describe as a wall-less, roof-less shed. And the third, which was the site of my hilltop concert, is the incomparable Domo. Created by Ensemble, it's this almost surrealist concrete and earthen structure that Edward James would've loved on a hilltop with the Beartooth Mountains as the backdrop. I don't know if I'll ever hear Copland's *Appalachian Spring* again and be able to think of anywhere but here.



Exterior view of the Olivier Music Barn. Photo by Kevin Kinzley. © Tippet Rise Art Center.

The musical program is overseen by Pedja Mužijević, the irrepressibly charming pianist whose deft mixing of the old and the new is a central part of Tippet Rise's ability to get Neanderthals like me to soak in contemporary works that push comfort zones alongside classics we all know and love.

The other components are the intimacy and the brevity. The programs are kept to one hour, and the concerts are the classical musical equivalents of Miley Cyrus performing for her friends in a room at the Chateau Marmont.

"We wanted people to feel really comfortable," Cathy tells me. "And welcome, and not have a dress code."

Afterwards, if you've been inspired, go talk to Cathy and Peter. They're both giddy talking about what they're doing—even to journalists like me who are asking the same questions they've been asked for ten years.

Cathy's enthusiasm for the art is infectious, and Peter has the unique affliction of retaining too much of what he has read, heard, or done. Sitting with him and asking a question is like the moment the levee gives way. A torrent of stories, theories, artists, and things you must read pour forth—a dream for the curious. There's something very Ludwig of Bavaria about what they've wrought by combining the best of art, architecture, music, and nature. (Minus the mental illness, a kingdom to ruin, and murder-suicide.) No burden except the pursuit of beauty.

Some of you might be wondering, though, is this really *cool*?

Undoubtedly. It's one of those places only certain people know. I can't tell you how many dinners I've been to with art world people this year who weren't aware of its existence. I'd watch them furiously open their phone to look it up and screenshot it or put something in their notes app. And even when it comes to those who do know of it, so many haven't managed to go yet.

It's also laid back and unconventional—two classic requisites for coolness. It certainly runs counter to the now-boring summer tradition of splashing around in the theme park that is Europe in the summer.

But most importantly, it's confident. The folks here have won over the ranchers with their music and art, so there's little doubt they'll prevail with you, too.

Tippet Rise is located just east of Yellowstone National Park in Fishtail, Montana. It's roughly an hour from Billings or two hours from Bozeman. It is open on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays from the end of June through early October for hiking and biking. Van tours are offered through early August. The concert season lasts from mid-August until the end of September. Concert tickets are done via a lottery system and visits to the center become available in spring. While it is completely booked for 2025, they do post availability when cancellations come in so check [their website](#).

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