In My Element

Alisa Hammond McLaughlin

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IN MY ELEMENT
By
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B.S. Home Economics Education, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT 1983

Professional Paper
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

McLaughlin, Alisa, M.A., Summer 2009, Fine Arts Integrated Arts and Education

In My Element

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This paper conveys the rich background savored from my family’s ranch and how it still deeply affects me, not only in my art, but how I view the world.

My final Creative Pulse project was to intentionally set aside time to create more personal art. This journey of art exploration quickly exposed a strong sense of place that emanated from the ranch of my childhood upbringing. Thus, my journey became three-fold; create art with my students, present our art in a gallery showing and investigate the impact place has on people.

The Chinese brush painting and oil painting adult education classes that I found were challenging but rewarding. Previous ceramics instructions enabled me to teach my high school students and even adult education classes on the subject. Experimenting with acrylics, photography, gouache and mixed media filled out my year of developing more deeply as an artist. By becoming a student of art once again, empathizing with my students in their learning process became easier and my learning styles became more evident, thus deeply affecting my teaching in many ways.

My year of developing my artistic skills culminated in a show at a local western art gallery. Even the art show reflected a sense of place as my family came from the ranch and regarded it as any other family gathering, bringing an abundance of food and sharing stories by the hour.

Through much research and reflection on a sense of place it became evident that it is a vastly overwhelming, but fascinating, subject. Several reasons for the ranch influence on my art became apparent; I have not only spent more time on the ranch than any other place, but also spent my early formative years there. But, more importantly, my deliberations led me to a deeper understanding of my place in the world.
DEDICATION

To my husband, Tim McLaughlin, for his encouragement, inspiration and enthusiastic support.

~And~

To my parents, Bert & Arlene Hammond, for my sense of place.
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INTRODUCTION

Like many young girls, horses were my passion while growing up. Pencil drawings of them covered my school notebooks. Assignments to use spelling words in sentences became challenges to include horses as often as possible. A camera purchase in 5th grade became another tool to document my favorite art subject, until my father suggested that people photos may be more interesting to look back on. He was right, however, my grandfather continued to encourage my art by presenting me with a handmade leather sketchbook complete with my registered brand. It was promptly filled with more drawings of horses.

Figure 1, Lester W. Hammond, Leather Sketchbook, 4” x 6”, circa 1971

Figure 2, Author, Horse drawing from leather sketchbook, 4” x 6”, circa 1971

However, my attachment to horses went beyond a pre-pubescent craze. Because they were vital to the operation of my parent’s cattle ranch on which I was raised, horses
were an essential part of my life from a young age. We were given a lot of responsibility, mostly in the form of ranch jobs that needed to be done horseback. Consequently, I became emotionally attached to several horses.

Elementary school art was my favorite subject and in high school I took as many art classes as possible. However, in college I only enrolled in a couple of art classes and decided not to get an art minor, a regretted decision for many years. My proposal for this Creative Pulse Final Project was to dedicate time and resources to develop my artistic abilities and therefore improve my proficiency in teaching art to Junior and Senior High students. I have been teaching Art and Family and Consumer Science to grades 7-12 for seven years and attempted to earn an Art Minor through summer classes only to find out that this is not possible in Montana. I did, however, receive an art endorsement on my teaching certificate through MSU Bozeman in February 2009 after they reviewed all my transcripts from various schools. Several artists in residence worked with me and my students, and I was conscientious to provide my students with the best art education possible, but developing my artistic skills still seemed imperative. The art pieces I chose to create this year were directly influenced by my High School Art curriculum and the adult education classes available to me. Chinese brush painting, ceramics, oil painting, acrylics, applied textures, cattle markers, watercolors, mixed media collage and gouache painting were the resulting mediums used.

Through the process of creating, I realized my art is still influenced by my ranch upbringing and was curious to know why since I have lived in Gardiner longer than at the ranch. My intent then became to further delve into my connection to place through research and reflection and to also facilitate my student's exploration of place in their
artwork. I explored many books on the subject of sense of place and contemplated why my sense of place was so rooted at the ranch. Tim Cresswell’s, *A Short Introduction to Place* resonated the most with my experiences. Cresswell’s narratives reminded me of several childhood stories that I recorded in my journal at this time. Several other place books happened to come into my life that had a strong sense of place: *Homestead* by Annick Smith, *Greetings from Wisdom, Montana* by Ruth Rudner, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* by Spike Van Cleve, Danny Gregory’s *Everyday Matters*, and *When the Meadowlark Sings* by Nedra Sterry.

As I delved into of a sense of place, however, it exploded into an immense, unique vision of the world. It went from how a ranching background influences my art subject matter to how it affects my classroom and my students for their futures.

My artwork tends to be experimental, and I usually move rather quickly on to the next idea instead of completing a work enough to be displayed. So to finish enough art to have a show plus the rest of the details to put on an art show was challenging. To put my experimental learning projects on display as art was also intimidating. But knowing that I had an art show to prepare for was a catalyst in my creativity, to actually finish projects and to take risks that I normally would not.

Although my personal art, classroom art, art show and sense of place are inextricably interwoven, they were separated into three parts so that I could fully explain all the experiences and stories involved.

Part One examines the art projects created during this project. It tells of the skills acquired and the stories illustrated by the art, stories that revealed a deep-seated influence from my childhood on the ranch.
Part Two recreates the art show and how the coming together of my family and community to share my art was a fitting conclusion of my exploration of a sense of place. As the guests considered my narrative art, they shared their own anecdotes with me and one another.

Part Three looks at the ranch itself, the memories and the lessons learned that constitute who I am and how I interact with the world today.

PART ONE: The Art Process

Eagerly, I began my year’s adventure of art project immersion. New magazine subscriptions, art blogs, adult education classes, talking with other artists, as well as designing art projects for my students served to inspire me toward my goal of creating more art. I readily took advantage of any art opportunity offered in my small community.

Chinese Brush Painting~A Glorious Beginning

Serendipitously, my college friend, Tracy Krushensky invited me to join her in a one-day class on Chinese Brush Painted Horses taught by Stephan Boone of Studio Boone in nearby Bozeman, an appropriate kick-off to this year of intentional art.

There were only three students in class that day. When Mr. Boone realized Tracy and I are friends he offered to rearrange the seating so we could sit next to one another. We just laughed and reassured him that we had better stay put because if we were sitting next to one another we would be talking too much and painting too little. I shared this story with my high school class when they asked why they needed assigned seats and it helped them understand.
Mr. Boone has studied under Chinese Master Painters and had thoroughly researched the day’s subject – the Imperial Horse. This horse’s hooves never touch the ground, his barrel is long, flank narrow and chest broad. Before beginning to paint the horse, Mr. Boone instructed us to practice value and line painting to experiment with how increasing or decreasing pressure on the brush would affect the line. The Imperial Horse is painted in a precise manner. Brush stroke numbers one through three form his near eye. An eye’s width away is the far eye. It is a replica of the left edge of the near eye. The face line goes down to the nostril in an arch. The top of the arch requires more pressure on the brush and is painted slower. With a twist of the brush the nostril is widened on the right side. A line extends from the far eye to the nose; another line forms the chin and the several strokes back up to the jaw. Then the brush is rinsed slightly and the area from the ear to the cheek is shaded. This precision is continued throughout the rest of the body.

Figure 3, Author, Chinese Brush Painted Horses, 2008
At home, the dining room table provided an excellent work space; however, our two cats thought the paper was there for their amusement, forcing me and my project down to the basement. Several more hours of practice were put in, but under too much pressure; my sisters wanted them for Christmas. My best horses were done in Mr. Boone’s class, perhaps from the more concentrated effort than expended since. I searched extensively for books, videos and other resources on Chinese Brush painted horses but found only a few. All the supplies still lie on the table in the basement waiting a few spare minutes of practice from me. However, the concept of Chinese Brush Painted Horses was carried into my classroom as they were painted on clay tiles and taught to my students.
Where To From Here?

While the Chinese Brush Painted Horses was a great beginning to my Creative Pulse project, I struggled with exactly how it should continue. The process slowly unfolded as I discovered new lesson plans and adult education classes became available.

My students made collages from contour drawings they had done of random objects. My attempt to do so was not very successful. I wanted to make gel medium transfers of my contour drawing of cowboy boots and a fiddle but the gel medium turned to mush when I tried to wash it off.

![Figure 5, Student Work, Contour Drawing Collage, 2008]
As I began to think about and create art a sense of place began to emerge from all the western symbols. What attracted me to cowboy boots and fiddles, horses and leather?

Where to create my art was another struggle. One option was the basement of my home. I spent several hours organizing my art supplies and did spend some time on art there, but it became more of a storage area for art and supplies than a work area. I ended up doing most of my art at my dining room table or at school. Basements have never been my favorite space in any house and I usually spend as little time as possible in them, but I had hoped mine would be different.

Paradise Gallery

The Paradise Gallery first drew me in with its western and Yellowstone National Park themed art and its informal, comfortable atmosphere. Owner/artist, Carol Newbury
Howe, made me feel right at home with her easy, welcoming manner. She also has a rural background and we share similar philosophies.

I continued my art exploration with lessons from Ms. Howe on how to use her computerized matt cutting machine. Then she demonstrated how to cut and assemble glass and a frame over a matted print. She kindly allowed me to present my Art Show in her gallery and offered me a job there for the summer of 2009.

Ceramics

Local sculptor, Sue Tirrell http://www.suetirrell.com/ had been our Artist-in-Residence at Gardiner High School the previous three years and through her teaching had given me enough confidence so that I taught ceramics to my students by myself this year. I continued to practice and experiment with various clay building and glazing methods and even taught two sessions of adult education ceramics. What follows is a list of ceramic projects, the techniques involved and the stories those pieces illustrate.

Figure 7, Author, Adult Ed Class Photo, 2008

"Junior High Houses"
This church was designed as a building pattern for my junior high classes. A frosting bag was used to make the filigree for the windows and the roofing tiles. It has a hole in the bottom for a light to shine through the windows.

Figure 8, Author, Church, Sculpture, 2008

Figure 9, Student Work, 2008
“Mosaic Horse Tile”

My students made mosaic tiles in various styles. This is my example of one way to do it: draw a picture in the wet slab of clay and cut it out.

Figure 10, Author, Horse Mosaic, 2008

Figure 11, Student Work, Mosaic, 2008
"Chinese Horse Tile"

This uses the same technique as the Chinese brush paintings, only with diluted velvet under glaze. It was actually a little easier because the mistakes could be "erased" by scraping off a little glaze.

![Image of a horse tile]

Figure 12, Author, Chinese Horse Tile, 2008

"All the Little Pigs," Narrative Tile

This project was found at: http://www.amaco.com/amaco-lesson-plans/amaco-lesson-15-a-new-approach-to-developing-images-on-clay. We received more satisfaction and compliments from these projects than any others we did this year.
My narrative tile is actually an illustration for a children’s story that I’d written several years ago. I’d collected resource material for the illustrations so had those available already for the narrative tile. Here is the true story from my childhood:

“This little pig went to market. This little pig stayed home…”
For the four small girls playing together, home was a made over log cabin in Montana whose warmth kept them safe from the biting cold outside. The woodstove was the heart of the main room that served as kitchen, dining and living rooms. But the cabin’s cold floors still made bare feet run across it to dive onto the davenport or a bed.

Dad leaned against the stove holding Mom close. Uncle Willson was reading the Agri-News near the table with his feet propped up on another chair.

Dad kissed Mom and said, “Well, I sure hate to leave this hot stove and go out into the bitter cold night, but I better go check on that sow that is expecting her babies any time now. They won’t last long at this temperature.” He and Uncle Willson bundled up and trudged out into the night.

The girls were snuggled up on the davenport. They were pink from their baths, and their toes were peaking out from under their nightgowns.

“This little pig had roast beef. This little pig had none,” they continued.
“Get a box!” called Dad, as he and Uncle Willson blew through the door in a gust of cold air.

Mom quickly found one and placed it on the oven door. Then Dad and Uncle Willson started pulling newborn pigs out of their partially unbuttoned coats.

As Uncle Willson brought each little pig out, he kissed it before putting it in the box.

“Oh sick!” cried all the girls. But he only laughed, and said; “They couldn’t be any cleaner than they are right now. Help me get this one that crawled around to my back.” So one of the girls reached into his coat and pulled out a squirming pig and set it in the box.

Uncle Willson said, “This one was upside down in the pickup.”

The girls named that one Upside Down Pig, until it got so big they couldn’t tell it from the others.

Soon, all ten little pigs had climbed into one cozy heap in a corner of the box and were fast asleep. In the morning, they would go back to their mama in the pig shed.

And all the girls cried “Whee..!” as they ran and jumped into bed so their own little pigs wouldn’t get cold on the kitchen floor.

My students also expressed their sense of place in this assignment. Some of them illustrated specific places and some were more representative of a general biome such as mountains. One of my students had this to say about the following narrative tile, “This is the place I learned to fly fish. It is in the Big Horn Mountains in Wyoming. I specifically remember this place because I also caught my first fish here. If I could go fishing anywhere, this would be the place I would go back to.”

Figure 14, Student Work, Narrative Tile, 2008
“Collaged Container”

This project was designed for my high school students by combining three different ideas from a ceramics book. One idea was to build around a container, the next was to combine random shapes like a collage and the other was to include a woven bottom. Unfortunately, this project proved to be too difficult for universal success, so was abandoned, but not before several students created imaginative projects.

My example tells a story of the day dad got bucked off a horse and then had no memory or knowledge of who any of us were. Mom took him to the hospital. I took care of the horse and then drove our 1963 Chevy truck up to the mailbox. I heard on the radio that Elvis had died that day. Due to the traumatic events of the day, Elvis’ death was burned into my memory along with my dad getting bucked off.

![Image of ceramic sculpture](image1.jpg)

*Figure 15, Author, “The Day Elvis Died-August 16, 1977” Ceramic Sculpture, 2009*

My student’s example is a fishing themed collage. This student and his family are avid hunters and fishermen. The narrative tile above was created by his brother.
"Mixing Bowls," Hand Built Slabs, Majolica Glaze

These are designed to represent my four daughters, and are gifts to them - Molly~Pink, Tara~Blue, Lily~Yellow, Amber~Green, their favorite colors. The matching bowls also represent the unity of the group of sisters. They all bake regularly and several of them had requested mixing bowls for Christmas. The enamelware look is due to the sponge painted glazes.
TEXTURED PROJECTS

"Rustic Bowl and Organic Shapes"

While cutting out bases for the girls’ bowls, I was left with a long, narrow piece of leftover clay with a curved bottom edge that naturally curled into a bowl shape. I scratched and attached a round bottom to the cylinder and had a new way to make a bowl. The top edge was left uncut and rough. The organic shaped rattles have little pieces of clay inside to shake.

Figure 18, Textured Bowl and Organic Rattles, Ceramics, 2009

"Textured Vase"

Built like the Mixing Bowls, this vase was glazed with majolica and then the leaf design was carved in.
"Pie Plate, Dessert Plate and Casserole Dish"

"Hand Built Slabs"

This over-sized pie plate was made for Tim’s apple pies. The heart design replicated the steam vent I always cut in his pies. Then, he needed a plate to eat the pie on and one thing led to another. The casserole dish was designed for our toaster oven. Not until I was organizing my art for the show, did I realize that the plates in my Place Triptychs match these ceramic ones. The matching ceramic cat bowl was not intentional.
Majolica and Copper Experiments; "Hand Built Slab Duck Planter", "Two Wheel Thrown Projects", "Coil Built Cup and Star Plaque"

All winter was spent experimenting with different amounts of majolica and copper, creating everything from the dark, metallic cup to the green bowls to the antiqued star plaque and medallions depending on the thickness of the majolica layer and the copper layer. If the majolica is thick the result is a opaque creamy white undercoat. If it is very thin it turns brown and antiqued looking. If the copper is heavily applied, it fires a dark metallic color. If applied thinner, it results in varying shades of green.

The pattern for this duck planter was found in an old ceramics book. It needs to be redesigned to better hold a plant.

Figure 21, Author, Cat Dish, Ceramics, 2009

Figure 22, Author, Majolica Duck Planter, Ceramics, 2009
This star plaque verse is from Psalm 147:4 “He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.” If stars, which are pieces of rock, are that special to God, imagine what an important place you and I hold in the universe.

![Figure 23, Author, 8" Star Plaque, Ceramics, 2009](image)

Two of these medallions were created with a Celtic design rubber stamp. The horse on the right was hand drawn with glaze.

![Figure 24, Author, Majolica Horse Medallions, Ceramics, 2009](image)

Whistles are one of the first projects that my senior high art classes craft as they begin our ceramics unit. These two examples of mine about the size of a quarter, but most students make much larger ones.
Senior Pictures

Senior pictures were another creative endeavor in my year of art projects. The rich sense of place photos of Great Falls photographer, Cindy Cieluch at http://cindycieluch.com challenged me to find interesting backgrounds for my student’s senior pictures. Ms. Cieluch’s work includes images of couples in front of brightly colored warehouses, brides on piles of hubcaps, and families in abandoned houses. When I captured the following photo of Pauline between double rainbows, I emailed it to Ms. Cieluch and thanked her for her inspiration. She sent an incredibly encouraging email in response.

Pauline was born and raised in Mammoth Hot Springs in Yellowstone National Park so it was fitting that we take her senior pictures there with Everett’s Peak and Mammoth Terraces as backdrops. She refused photos with the elk as that would be a tourist-like pose.
Abstract Maps

One of the most appealing projects I found was a Road Map Relief: Mixed Media painting at http://www.princetonol.com/groups/iad/lessons/high/Ken-map.htm which we
called Abstract Maps. This lesson plan included finding an interesting part of a map and enlarging the lines onto Masonite and then building up those lines with glue and paper towels and covering the whole surface with toilet paper and glue to create the texture. Any buildings were represented by rectangles of corrugated cardboard. These were then richly painted with layers of acrylic paints and antiqued with black oil paint. Of course, my first impulse was to go to Google Earth and look up my parent’s ranch. My students’ reaction was also to find one of their favorite places. (everywhere from their house to Paris) “Bounty One” is my parent’s ranch.

Figure 28, Author, Bounty One, Acrylic & Mixed Media, 2009

“Bounty Two” is a quick (no reference to a map) rendition of our place in Gardiner. A feeling of disloyalty came over me for my uncaring treatment of this place.
So I had to re-do it accurately in “Bounty Two-The Re-Make”.

Figure 30, Author, Bounty Two-The Re-Make, Acrylic & Mixed Media, 2009
Extra paper towels wadded up in my hand inspired me to do just one more -

"Excessive Bounty".

Figure 31, Author, Excessive Bounty, Acrylic & Mixed Media, 2009

My students received a lot of satisfaction from creating these projects.

Figure 32, Student Work, Abstract Map, Acrylic and mixed media, 2009

Place Triptychs

"Cloth, Paper, Scissor" magazine, Nov/Dec 08 edition had Canvas Multimedia

Sense of Place projects that I adapted into a lesson plan for my high school students.
*House is a House for Me* was read to the students as an unit introduction. The assignment was to have a monochromatic scheme and 1 to 3 other colors in small amounts and to be a representation of the student in a special place. The assignment was to use joint compound to texture and embellish with graphite sticks, acrylic paint, and newsprint.

"Bounty One" represents my parent’s dining room table and the joy and laughter of that place. It was the place to gather for meals, coffee breaks or to visit if guests came by. Sometimes, my three sisters and I would get sidetracked by some silly tangent and off we would go, each one adding some hysterical element to it, giggling so hard that no one else could understand what we were saying.

"Bounty Two" is my current dining table where we gather to hear the stories of the day and discuss a variety of topics. A guest recently commented that he could not believe we sat around as a family for several hours after dinner visiting with him and one another. It was not like that at his house while growing up.

"Abundant Bounty" is our deck table where we have our summer parties under the stars with my daughters and friends singing to us late into the night, rather what I think heaven will be like.

This series gave me a chance to express how I feel about my friends and families and the times spent with them and how indistinctive a place is without them.
Figure 33, Author, Place Triptych, Acrylic & Mixed Media, 2009

Figure 34, Student Work, Acrylic & Mixed Media, 2009
Oil Painting

Local painter, Shirl Ireland was our Artist-in-Residence this year. She taught Oil Painting to my High School art classes in April. In preparation for this experience, I took her two sessions of classes for adults January through March. I had been talking to her about the artist in residency for several weeks when it finally dawned on me that it would be a good idea to take her adult education class. By this time they had met once so when I got there I was already behind. My first class I painted an acrylic painting of a watering can. I was so frustrated and overwhelmed, I almost quit.

Figure 35, Author, Watering Can, Acrylics, 2009

The next week I decided I might as well take the plunge and try oil painting and I tried to paint a church birdhouse. The results were not much more successful.
By the third painting I was starting to see possibilities for my achievement and enjoyment of oil painting and finished out the series of adult classes.
Figure 38, Author, Squashes, Oil, 2009

Figure 39, Author, Lemons, Oil, 2009
I continued to paint with my students in my classroom under Ms. Ireland’s tutelage empathizing with them in their beginning frustration and encouraging them through it. Ms. Ireland took a survey at the beginning of class and from the results set up still-lifes each week; Easter basket, African artifacts, technology and baking. Due to the time constraints, several of these exercises were not “finished”.

*Figure 40, Author, Antique Technology, Oil, 2009*
Figure 41, Author, Baking Still Life, Oil, 2009

Figure 42, Author, Easter Basket, Oil, 2009
Figure 43, Student, Technology, Oil, 2009

Figure 44, Student, Baking Still Life, Oil, 2009
Figure 45, Student, Baking Still Life, Oil, 2009

Figure 46, Student, Baking Still Life, Oil, 2009
Oil painting went from least favorite medium to one that I want to do more of in the future. It seemed so fussy and messy and difficult. Thanks to the teachings and encouragement of Ms. Ireland, I realize now that is achievable and actually dream about it.

**Art Mobile**

Having the Montana Art Mobile [http://www.artmobilemontana.org/](http://www.artmobilemontana.org/) come to our school was one more way to immerse myself and my students in art. Allison McGree came and presented art pieces from contemporary Montana artists to small groups of students all of one day. The next day she taught hands-on art projects to students in K-6 and my two high school art classes. She demonstrated cattle marker landscapes and my students and I worked on them for several days after she was here.

*Figure 47, Student, Sunset, Cattle Markers, 2009*
The passion to create art has always been with me but was sometimes suppressed by the responsibilities of adulthood. When the effort was made to prioritize art in my life, and I became aware of my sense of place, my whole world view shifted and expanded.

PART TWO: The Art Show

The Presentation

On a balmy April evening we gathered in the Paradise Art Gallery for my Opening Party. One hundred fifty people kept up a steady stream through the aisles perusing my art and spilling out the open door to the wrought iron tables and chairs on the sidewalk. There they relaxed and visited while across the street in Yellowstone National Park, the snow on Sepulchre Mountain and Electric Peak sparkled in the rays of the setting sun. This is the place where my year of creating art and exploring a sense of place was put on view for my community and family and friends from afar.

The Process

Several ideas for invitations came to mind and were rejected. Then I discovered gouache painting. Gouache is like thick watercolor paint. My inspiration for this medium and style of painting came from a graphic design artist’s website called www.boygirlparty.com. Her designs are simple, flat textured and are mostly animals. The first image that came to mind was a girl dancing with a horse, because I feel so alive while riding a well trained horse as it glides under me. I was so intrigued with trying the gouache, that I was not worried about the drawing, so it was a loose quick sketch. My goal was to get the painting smooth and professional looking. I tried all kinds of techniques, from layer after layer each in a different direction to scrubbing it with paper
towel until I about wore out the paper. I finally achieved the look I wanted in Adobe Photoshop. I also changed the position of the moon so it would not look like it was coming out of the horse’s mouth, then lightened and posterized it.

![Image of a horse and woman dancing]

*Figure 48, Author, Original Dancing Horse, Gouache, 2009*

As I considered my art and where I am in life, thankful for my upbringing on the ranch, content with my place in Gardiner, and my joy in teaching I came up with the theme, “In My Element”. I am at peace where I am, in all ways, by most definitions of a sense of place.

My invitation begins...Dear Friends, Your presence would be my delight.... I was more than delighted with the turnout for my opening party.
Dear Friends:

Your presence would be my delight...

Opening Party:
Saturday, April 18, 2009 from 4:00-8:00 p.m.
Refreshments
Live Music (starting at 6:00 p.m.)

Location:
The Paradise Gallery
210 Park Street
Gardiner, Montana
406-848-9155
www.theparadisegallery.com

Art Show continues April 18-25, 2009,
daily from 9:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.
(closed Sundays & Mondays)

This Art Show is the Final Project Presentation
for my Creative Pulse Graduate Program
(University of Montana-Missoula)
and features my personal, experimental art,
lesson examples for my students
and samples of my students' art work.

Thank you, Alisa
alisa.mcl@gmail.com
(406)648-7171

Alisa McLaughlin
PO Box 237
Gardiner, MT 59030

At this point Ms. Howe and I realized we had miscommunicated. I had planned
this Art Show only as a display of my artwork that I had done for classroom samples and
personal experimentation. She thought I should be selling my art, so she was quite tickled
with herself and her opinion when, the day after I hung my dancing horse art show poster
in the gallery, a lady from Texas walked in and declared she wanted to buy a print of it.
Carol’s son has a printmaking business and she ordered fifteen in time for my Art party.
They have all since sold and we are on the second order.

Next, I had to decide which art pieces to include in my gallery show and how to
present them. I decided to include everything I had created since August 2008 and older
pieces that had inspired me to create the newer ones. But then came the overwhelming
question of how it should be presented. I finally came to the conclusion that I needed to
do it by medium. I had also invited some of my students to show their work with mine as
they had also explored a sense of place with me in the classroom and had created artwork
that was inspired by my samples.

Carol had no extra wall space or displays on which to hang my work, so my
husband, Tim, volunteered to make them. I was not sure how to design a space to hang
artwork when I did not know how much room it would take. I finally counted up all the
artwork pieces that I wanted to hang, multiplied it by 1-1/2’ (average size) and added
enough space for the art descriptions. It turned out that two old barn doors sitting in our
shed were the perfect size. Tim made supports for the barn doors and with the help of
some friends, moved them into the middle of the Paradise Gallery and installed them. To
tie my display together, we placed barn boards on top of the glass display cases and
installed my ceramic pieces on them.
Relics from my past

I also had a corner of another display cabinet that I arranged some relics from my past. I felt these helped tell the story of where I came from and who I am. They included:

"Amy from Little Women"

This porcelain doll was created from a kit when I was in high school. The corresponding book resonated with my family because of them also having four daughters full of escapades. I am also intrigued by the mechanics of attaching the porcelain head and limbs to a fabric body and am using the same technique to make a horse. The clay head and five legs (in case one gets broken, and to increase the chances of the legs matching one another) are hand sculpted.

Figure 51, Author, Doll, 1976
“Coyote”

This is an acrylic painting from high school I created using a National Geographic photo. Coyotes always had their place in story telling around our kitchen table, especially young ones. Three or four of them “surrounded” my sister and I on horseback in the hills one day. When we ran away her horse bucked her off. Then there was the time I rode down the face of Hammond’s Hill and came up behind two coyotes who were watching my sister chasing cows below them. My horse almost stepped on them before they realized we were behind them.
“Wire Horse”

I also created this wire horse in high school. (Horses really can scratch their ear with a hind foot.)

![Wire Horse](image)

*Figure 54, Author, Horse, Wire & Horseshoe, 1979*

I worked as a hunting camp cook in Hellroaring, 20 miles by horseback from Jardine, MT, the first year I was married. The next winter I created this appliqué of that experience.
For some reason, I could not write the art descriptions until the pieces were displayed at the gallery, so I spent part of the morning of the opening party typing them up. Meanwhile friends and family were cooking up a storm. Carol had expressed concern earlier that we needed to have plenty of refreshments. I laughingly reassured her that I was raised to feed my guests well and that she need not worry. Her countertop was not big enough to hold all the food my family and I brought. The abundance of food reminded me of brandings where the lunch is a feast of appreciation for the family and friends who have come to help.

The Party

We were not quite finished hanging the show when party guests began arriving. The gallery was open all day also. My mom and dad drove 5 hours to see my show, spent a couple hours visiting and turned around and drove 5 hours back so they could do ranch chores in the morning. My three sisters came for the weekend-Dianna from Sydney, Shana from Glendive and Theresa from her house on our parent’s ranch. My friend, Jean from the Creative Pulse, and her husband came all the way from Butte and my college friend, Tracy and husband drove over from Bozeman. Two of my older daughters came home from college to help make refreshments and see my show and visit with everyone who came. Our friends Linc, Danny and Siri played and sang for us for a couple of hours, adding a nice touch. My daughters, Lily and Molly joined them for a few songs.
The editors of the Park Island newspaper happened to be visiting our end of Yellowstone National Park and wanted to know the story behind the Dancing Horse print and took our photos, the only posed ones we took that night.

The risk and rigor of what I had gone through to put this Art Show together was illustrated by a friend of mine who has been designing tote bags and purses. She has a laundry basket full of them. At my art party I suggested she sell them at the gallery and even asked the owner if she would be interested (she was). But my friend said, “I don’t want to do it. It’s so intimidating to put my work out for everyone to see”!
My art show was up for the following week and at least another 50 people saw it, either signing the guest book or commenting to me about it.

PART THREE: The Sense of Place

Even my original Final Project Proposal was about a Sense of Place. It was to design a healthy house for my husband who has Multiple Sclerosis. I had a rough floor plan sketched out, a location chosen and had started research on it when I realized that it would be financially prohibitive to actually build and so relinquished the idea for now.

My next proposal was to intentionally set aside time to create my own personal art. While producing new lesson plans for my students, I found myself assigning project after project relating to a sense of place. Also, as I was producing my own art, both for class examples and for my own personal growth, I came to the realization that most of my art went back to my ranch roots. I realized most of the time I could not even tell a story in conversation with friends that did not involve the ranch somehow, even though I had been gone from the ranch longer than I had been there.

Then I recalled the week we did the Little People my first year in the Creative Pulse program, and how I became aware of my strong sense of place (home) then. Some of my classmate’s little people had incredible adventures, mine went looking for a house and I had already made her a one in a shoebox. The art assignment also found her in a campsite, another type of home. I also realized that the children’s book, A House is a House for Me summed up not only how I think about houses, but also a sense of place. Most things either live in a house or are a house for something else and everything in life is tied to a sense of place.
So I embarked on a journey of self-discovery on why I have such a strong sense of place. I hoped to understand how a sense of place has affected who I am and how it continues to be such an important part in my art work. I researched and reflected on a sense of place reading several books, the most useful being Place, a Short Introduction by Tim Cresswell, who said, “The only way humans can be humans is to be ‘in place’.” (Cresswell, p. 23) and “By taking space and place seriously, it was argued, we can provide another tool to demystify and understand the forces that effect and manipulate our everyday lives”(Cresswell, p. 27). The insights of Tim Cresswell resonated against my latent reminiscences. I thought about, read about and discussed a sense of place with many friends and family members. I discovered that a sense of place is so big and broad that books are written about each definition. I am only writing about the definitions that apply to my life. Also, in order to organize all the information, ideas and opinions regarding place that I collected over the year, I break it down into sub topics.

**Back at the Ranch**

Our friend, Bill Young quipped, “You can’t know who you are until you know where you’ve been.” In order to explain who I am I need to describe where I came from. Also, my art work is deeply affected by my experiences growing up on a ranch, full of the images in my mind left there from riding horses in snowstorms and gathering cows for branding and many other adventures.

The ranch in my life belongs to my parents, Bert and Arlene Hammond with a mailing address of Big Horn, MT; phone and electricity from Hysham and all other business done in Hardin with an occasional trip to Billings for major parts and supplies.
It is about 5,000 acres located on the Big Horn and Treasure County lines consisting of
the main place that Mom and Dad bought when I was a baby and paid for when I was in
junior high. (I still remember the day – we went out to dinner to celebrate.) The other part
of the ranch was inherited from my grandfather, Lester W. Hammond when he passed
away in 1982. His home place was about five miles off the county road on Cottonwood
Creek, and did not connect with ours, but his Windmill Pasture was about four miles
across country by horseback and connected to our part of the Windmill Pasture and our
Burns Pasture. The Ranch consists of grass and alfalfa meadows whose borders wind
along the tree lined creek, irrigated from a reservoir my dad built in the late 1960’s.
These meadows give way to sandrocks, pine trees, native grass and sagebrush covered
hills. In the spring, they are also covered with wildflowers; paintbrush, sego lilies and
shooting stars, among others. Black cows and calves dot the hillsides as they wander back
and forth between grazing and drinking at the reservoirs.
Figure 58, Google Earth Image, Hammond Ranch, 2009

My parent’s ranch consists of the left side and top half of this image. The left hand star is the home place, the upper right star is the windmill and the lower right was my grandfather’s place.

Things We Learned While Growing Up

But the ranch is more than a piece of real estate; it was home for me and my three younger sisters. We did not know it, growing up, but the years were pretty lean as my parents tried to pay for the ranch and start a herd of cattle. All we knew was the love and support of our family and neighbors as we grew up and learned the values associated with
the people in our area. “The only interesting question that can then be asked: by what social process(es) is place constructed?” (Harvey, 1996 p. 261)

Responsibility. We were trusted at young ages to do important things, from “babysitting” each other while Mom and Dad were outside doing chores or working in the fields nearby at four years of age to making dinner for the haying crew in 3rd grade to helping stack hay when in 5th grade. When a junior in high school, I drove a stock truck and trailer five hours, back from Gardiner with my two younger sisters. A friend had borrowed the truck to bring his horses from winter pasture on our ranch. We got some funny looks as people passed us three teenagers in the cab of the huge truck. My mom confessed later that she was really nervous about us doing it, and my sixteen year old daughter sure will not be driving any vehicle that far anytime soon, but we were used to driving that truck and did fine. We are still honored that our Dad trusted us with that much responsibility.

Manners. Offer someone something to drink, do not eat in front of others without offering them some, and walk visitors to their car. Do not ask how many cows a rancher owns, it’s like him asking you how much money you make.

Men never wear a hat into the house or a building. Never touch a man’s hat without his permission. People from other walks of life do not seem to know these things. My cousin and her husband took my brother-in-law and nephew’s hats and squashed them onto their heads, because my Mom had told them to just “grab some off the Porch” (thinking of some old ones out there and forgetting the good ones also hanging there for the weekend) My brother-in-law and nephew were furious but extremely polite and kind about the whole incident and my cousin never knew that it was not the thing to do.
How to move cows a horseback. Do not rush toward their head or go way behind them if you want them to go forward; aim for a specific point on their hip. Take them as calmly as you can without stirring them up anymore than necessary. Only a couple of people are needed to ride drag; some of the riders need to be ahead of the cows planning where to turn them while others need to be on the sides of the herd. On the way back to the house, ride beside Dad, not behind him, unless you are a dude. Do not let your horse eat grass while you are riding it. Never let your horse run back to the barn.

Neighborliness. If your neighbor needs you, you drop things and go help, because services like fire departments, ambulances and hearses are not readily available or affordable. Getting together to help one another brand cattle used to be the social highlight of the year for us girls where we would have water fights and check out the newest hired hands in the area.

Always eating meals together. My dad teased me unmercifully at the table, things like telling me there is a mouse in the corner and when I would turn my head to look, he would snitch my bacon off my plate and eat it. I was furious, but as an adult looking back, it is one of my favorite memories because he thought he was so funny. Breakfast, dinner and supper were where we discussed the day’s events and solved the world’s problems. We always ate fresh, home cooked meals, rarely any type of convenience foods.

My role in life. Work hard. Be honest. Make do with what you have or make it yourself. You can do anything you put your mind to. Life is not fair. A good reputation is priceless. Figure it out for yourself. Do not give unsolicited advice; everyone needs to be able to live their own life without interference from others. Even though others may
not do their job or respect the boss, you do what is right. My parents did not have any sons, so we girls were the farm and ranch hands. We had to be tough to do some of the things required of us, but also expected to be ladies at the same time. We did not engage in course behaviors and had the decency to be embarrassed when we figured out the neighboring Padlock ranch cowboys had probably overheard our swearing at our bulls that would not stop fighting and move out for us. My sister and I were proud of the fact that we could wrestle calves with the best of the guys and at our neighbors’ branding were right in time with the other wrestlers, taking our turn at wrestling the next calf being drug out of the corral. We were slightly taken aback, however, while waiting for dinner in their living room later that day, when my dad asked us to go help the ranch wife in the kitchen.

**Life on the Ranch**

Life was defined by the seasons. Winter was spent going to and coming home from school on the bus in the dark, both directions, helping to do chores at night and helping to feed cows on the weekends. Chopping open ice for the cows to drink from the creek was always a challenge for us girls. Mom and Dad were often tired during this season as they got up several times during the night to check on cows that were calving. Every once in awhile we would wake up to a calf bawling in the kitchen, brought in so it would not freeze in its newborn wetness. We kids, however, did manage time to learn to ice-skate on the reservoir, cross-country skied a little and went sledding. Spring found us glad to be out of school and going to brandings, ours and the neighbors’. Summer meant putting up hay, starting with stacking small bales in 5th grade. I graduated to running the
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swather and in high school did all the baling for several summers. We would take breaks to cool off by swimming in the reservoir. Fall was a fresh start back at school with new shoes and clothes and, on the weekends, pitching alfalfa into the threshing machine.

“"The house/home is a primal space that acts as a first world or first universe that then frames our understandings of all the spaces outside" (Bachelard p. 24). Most children, as they develop, venture from their house to their yard, to their neighborhood, and then to their town. I went from my house to my yard, to riding horses and pickups in the meadows and hills of the ranch. When I think of neighbors it is not only their houses that come to mind, but their corrals and pastures where we have helped them gather cows.

We had a root cellar with a distinct smell. It was bulldozed when we were quite young. Maybe that is why I do not like basements plus the fact they are away from the main part of the house. I did set up my art studio in our basement, but I have chairs down there and beg my family to come do homework or read a book down there with me.

**Animal Life on the Ranch**

My art includes many symbols of ranch life especially people and animals. The cows were too numerous to name but the milk cows were named as we discovered their unique personalities. Calamity Jane, a Hereford Angus cross, was a challenge to milk and always had to be tied up. Pickles was a mild mannered Shorthorn with malformed horns and freckles on her white face. Because of our much closer interaction with the horses we worked the cows with; they almost became members of our family, and helped to shape our lives. Peanuts was a Shetland pony that my grandpa bought for all of his grandchildren but who stayed on our ranch. He had his charming moments as he begged
at the back door for pancakes or modeled straw hats but wasn’t much help in moving cows as he spent most of his energy trying to get rid of us by scraping us off under a low-hanging branch or lying down.

Jenny came to the ranch with a hired hand and was left there when he went back to school. My parents bought her and gave her to me for Christmas when I was a fifth grader. She had been a 4-H project and handled extensively so was very cooperative in our requests of her, like when my cousins took turns sliding off her. She cut cows from the herd quite skillfully, if you could stay on her. If a cow wouldn’t cooperate, Jenny would reach out and bite them on top of their tail. She gave birth to three colts, one of which was Sego, whom I broke while a teenager. But Jenny was my favorite horse of all time and so naturally much of my artwork features a dark bay with forelock hanging below her eyes.

Roads

“One of the least investigated aspects of our European American culture is our ambivalent attitude toward the road and the street” (Jackson, p. 5). My experience has not been the same as Jackson’s. My Dad mentioned even before I started this project that he wanted to write about what Dry Creek Road, just out of Hardin, meant to him; all the major events of his life are tied to it.

I have a few Sarpy Creek Road memories that have to do with kids getting kicked off the school bus in the middle of nowhere for fighting or sassing the driver. This was a traumatic scene for a third grader to watch, knowing there were not any houses for fifteen miles in any direction. To get to school in Hardin we rode a small bus for 12 miles on
graveled Tullock Creek road until it met a bigger bus coming down Sarpy Creek road.

We would switch buses and ride another 18 miles on into town.

I memorized the 12 miles of Tullock Creek Road and could close my eyes and keep track of where we were as we drove along in the school bus, feeling and seeing each curve and hill in my mind’s eye. Sarpy was the main road to town, but Tullock was where we lived.

There was the time we were galloping down the road, my sisters and I, and a bit of mud flew up from the hooves of the horses in front of me and popped the lens out of my glasses. Sometimes when it rained, the road would be so muddy it would be impassable in a vehicle.

One summer I had to ride herd on the milk cows in a section of the county road so they would not get into the meadows. Our cars never kept their horns long as we often chased cows out of the meadow with them, honking unceasingly, usually on the way to town.

In about 3rd grade I learned to drive on that road. One recollection is driving the turquoise Dodge truck three miles to the Wide Spot in the Road pasture in 1st gear because I was not used to shifting gears. The first car I drove with automatic transmission was our great-Aunt Katherine’s car that my younger cousins drove when she passed away. These cousins also threw rocks at one another as they walked down the county road from our bus stop.

One cold winter night I was home alone. I was about fifteen. The rest of my family had stayed in town so my parents could go to a Farm Bureau meeting. I had just settled at the kitchen table next to the wood stove to do my homework when a lady
knocked on the door and opened it and almost fell into the kitchen. Our dog came racing out of the bedroom barking. The woman yelled, “Call off your dog”. Once we had all got over the shock of surprising one another and calmed down, she explained why she was there. She and her husband were from Canada where he had just undergone heart surgery. They were headed for Arizona for the warmer weather. They had accidentally taken Tullock Creek Road trying to get from Hwy 94 at Custer to Hardin. They had come to our 90 degree corner in our School Section and when the husband said, “Watch out,” the wife hit the brakes and slid into the snow filled barrow pit. They had no winter clothing so she had put on several layers of his socks and then his shoes and all the layers of thin jackets they had and walked about three miles down the road looking for help. She had given up and turned around to walk back to the car when she saw my light. I got her settled near the stove to warm up, took the stock truck full of grain (only available vehicle) and went to get her husband. He was fine and crawled up in the truck, but in my effort to turn it around, I drove into the snow filled barrow pit too. I ran home to call for help. It was about a mile and a half, below zero and a crystal clear night full of stars. The neighbor and his hired man came down with a tractor and pulled out the car and our truck. The hired man had to tease me by telling me that, while pulling it out, the truck had rolled over and spilled all the grain. By that time my family was home too and we all sat around visiting while the couple ate some hot soup before continuing on their way.

Near that corner was a really steep hill. The front tires of Dad’s truck would come up off the ground driving up it when loaded with hay, even with the weight of the overshoot. He would patiently coax the truck up the hill with “C’mon Betsy” and a grin on his face while I was about ready to open the door and jump out of the cab.
Often Padlock Ranch cowboys would move cows up or down Tullock Creek road, a great source of entertainment to four teenage girls.

When I was in high school a large power line came through our place carrying power from Colstrip to Seattle. The workers left a road that opened up access to hill pasture for reservoirs, hunting and putting out salt for cattle. The workers were again a fascination to us girls, but we all grieved the intrusion of the giant, metal, angel-shaped towers.

**Sense of Place in Time/History**

Our grandfather was a big part of our lives since his ranch was so close. He would ride down a horseback on Tuesdays and Fridays to get his mail that came in our box. He would drink his coffee, scalding hot and black with cookies my mother had made. He did not care if they were burnt, said they were great for dunking. So anytime my mother burnt cookies, we would comment she was making them for grandpa. I was born on his birthday and shared his love of art and horses. He would buy me curry combs for my horse and make hand painted birthday cards for me. We did not like to spend the night at his house. We are not sure why; no woman around was what we always thought. But partly it was because it was so primitive; water bucket and dipper, slop pail, cooking over a woodstove, kerosene lantern, scratchy, wool blankets, outhouse and the bunkhouse and all its artifacts from his family who lived there in the 40’s and 50’s, frozen in time. I remember salty oatmeal for breakfast and cold mush or delicious steaks for dinner at noon. My sister and I were often recruited to help him dehorn calves with a corn cob and
acid and he would get frustrated because he could not hold the stopper/applicator with his arthritic hands.

Time and space-wise we are tied to a ranching sense of place. Not only am I a fourth generation Montanan, but we can trace landownership roots all the way back on the Hammond side into England in the 1600s. Great-Grandpa Harry worked on cattle drives from Texas to Montana and owned several ranches in Montana and the Dakotas. His “chair” brand was one of the first registered in the state of Montana and now belongs to my mom and dad.

We know some of the history of the ranch before my parents bought it. It is situated on the “Ceded Strip” originally part of the Crow Reservation deeded back to the US Government in exchange for the irrigation project at Dunmore. It was originally homesteaded by Bob Smith and his sister, Nell Smith Tomlin. Bob bought out Nell’s share of the property and she moved to Crow Agency with her husband to teach school. When Bob Smith died, his niece, Lucille Miller and her husband, Delbert inherited the larger part of the ranch and then bought out the rest of the heirs. They were Iowa farmers, however, and were too busy to run a Montana ranch, so it was managed and leased by various people over the years. Walt Willoughby ran it during the late 50’s and my dad worked for Walt for a couple summers, haying and building fence. Some of that fence is still there today. My parents bought the ranch from Lucille Miller shortly after they were married in 1962.

**Kinesthetic Sense of Place**

My sister’s family has a cowboy friend who suffered brain damage through a tragic accident. He has learned to walk and ride horses again and can even rope quite
well. His muscles remember how. As I thought about this, and discussed local brandings with my students, I realized muscle memory is why I could still wrestle calves if need be. My mind’s eye can still remember exactly how to do it and feel in my body what each part does. It is the same with riding horses; I can go for several years, get on a horse and know what to do, kind of like riding a bike.

**Naming Places**

“Naming is one of the ways place is given meaning” (Cresswell, p. 97). My parent’s ranch has a plethora of descriptive names: Smith Coulee, The Burns, Hammonds Hill aka Bert’s Bump, Wide Spot in the Road, Bull Pasture, Windmill Pasture, North Fork of Rough Creek, Reservoir under the Powerline, Meadow by the Bridge. Up the creek, our neighbors lived at the Bird, the McCurdy, Plum Creek, the OW, the Perkins or the Turner. These names mean nothing to anyone but the people in the area. But to us, mention Smith Coulee and not only does a visual image of it come to mind, but every event that happened there comes rushing in.
"The heritage industry was also active, attempting to package places and their histories in a sanitized way in order to attract tourists and their money" (Cresswell, p. 54).

Ranches and cowboys in general inspire a strong sense of place with their unique settings, activities and clothing. The world romanticizes the lifestyle and all it represents. Many ranches have been converted to guest ranches as it is tough to make a living on cows alone. Tim and I thought about it in the early 80's but could not quite convince Dad that people would pay to come visit the Ranch. One of the other reasons we did not end up turning Mom and Dad's into a guest ranch is the major realization that by doing so and inviting people to come and be catered to would change the essence of the ranch we
hoped to share with others. But people come in swarms anyway. Shirt tail relatives, friends of friends and old Army buddies bring friends to hunt deer, pheasants and turkeys.

We four daughters invite a few select friends to the annual Memorial Day/Family Reunion/Branding as we want to maintain the family atmosphere as we visit with one another. But I have had several friends hint about wanting to come to a branding. My brother-in-laws family came one year and wanted to have their next family reunion at our branding, they enjoyed it so much. Our daughters and their cousins bring their friends. In fact, 2009’s branding crew was made up mostly of young people.

Hospitality

My favorite definition of hospitality is “making people feel like they’ve come home”. Our family has always enjoyed guests and doing our best to make them feel at home. My artwork reflects this as well in the number of dishes that I created this past years. The horses in my life have also been a part of this as we’ve given many people rides over the years, both on the ranch and at my home in Gardiner. When we were teenagers we had a second cousin come visit from Milwaukee. We offered her a ride and she thought we were talking about taking a drive in the pickup. Other distant cousins who came from L.A. to stay on a ranch traumatized us young girls as we watched them run our horses in the heat of the day, something we were taught never to do. We thought it just rewards when the saddle under one of them rolled under the horse’s belly.

Unfortunately, as a contrary teenager, I also told another distant cousin, who’d come to work for us, that the ranch wasn’t his home, hurting him quite deeply as I came to understand later.
My classroom has always been an area that I’ve strived to have exude that same feeling of coming home so that my students can be relaxed and feel taken care of and thus create their best work.

**Out of Their Element**

Once in awhile, family or friends will join us for the annual Memorial Day Branding/Reunion who are so far out of their comfort zone they can hardly function. They retreat to the house where there must be some sense of familiarity for them. The bawling of the cows and calves, the dust and the branding smoke as well as the roar of the propane branding pots combine to be a sensory overload.

Others will be thoroughly enjoying themselves, but do something that “just isn’t done on a Ranch” and they never know. For instance, people who do not really know what they are doing around cows, but think they do and boss everyone else.

My sister, Theresa, pointed out that people who move to the Tullock/Sarpy Creek area are accepted in their “weirdness” until they figure out how to live there (until they become “normal”)

“... people and practices were considered to have transgressed the supposedly common-sense link between place and the things that go on in it” (Cresswell, p. 27).

**Out of Our Element**

Hardin, at 30 miles away, was the closest town to the Ranch. We went to school and bought groceries there, but rarely socialized there. Town people knew who we were and how we were connected over the generations, but I did not know that existed until I became connected to my community in Gardiner. The neighboring ranchers on Tullock
and Sarpy Creeks had our own community. I remember my 4th grade teacher threatening to give us a test on all the streets in Hardin because she thought we should know “our” town better. It was not my town and I was in a panic the rest of the year. Fast forward to the next generation and my nephew, Dillon, was not allowed to do a Community Project on Sarpy Creek as a pre-requisite for a school field trip. It had to be performed in Hardin.

The World Came to Us

Even though we lived thirty miles from town and five miles from the nearest neighbor and at times felt shut out from the rest of the world, we had some visitors who brought the world to us. Since my mom’s relatives were from cities in Wisconsin and California, our life on the ranch was a novelty and many of them came to visit. They brought things to us that normally a family on a cattle ranch in Eastern Montana in the 1960’s would not have: avocados, artichokes, crab, shrimp and lobster from California, summer sausage, cheese and Old Milwaukee beer from Wisconsin. We also hosted international guests, friends of a neighbor in the Peace Corp. We listened to stories of mountain trekking and Tibetan refugees living in Nepal. My sisters and I all received custom made Tibetan rugs on our wedding days. More significantly, they conveyed to us ideas of other cultures from around the globe. Just a few years ago we had a three way exchange with Hardin, Gardiner and Tashkent, Uzbekistan high school students and 10 from each school came with me to the ranch. We marveled at the opportunity we had to experience Uzbek traditional dancing in the backyard, performed by students in full costume.

Discussions with Others about a Sense of Place
Few people talk about it even though our society is pervaded with it. "A saying from Sri Lanka states; 'The fish don't talk about the water'. What this means is that we rarely explicitly become aware of and talk about that which we take for granted" (Cresswell, p. 109). I did have some interesting conversations with friends and family about it, but others tried to make it more complex than it is and just became confused about the relevance of the topic.

My four daughters also have strong ties to the ranch, probably for similar reasons; values handed down to them, the adventures possible and the stability of the place. It has always been there for them, even when we moved from house to house in Gardiner. Most of their English writing assignments were written about the ranch.

My Mom has always talked about the difference between country life and city life, perhaps because she was from a city background. She and people who move into a country lifestyle, rather than being born into it, look at it differently than those of us who were born into it.

*Figure 60, Lester W. Hammond, Pen & Ink & Colored Pencil, Date unknown*
As my grandpa, Lester Hammond, wrote in the above poem, “To the City Man”,

“You can have your gay life in the bright lights and bars, I’ll take mine on the prairie under the stars. You can have your big car with its soft cushions and ease. Just give me a horse and saddle under my knees. You can live in your nice home with its fancy gadgets and frills. I’ll live in a little log cabin away in the hills. And when its all over and we’ve both ceased to be, say Mister, who lived the best life? It was You? No, it was Me!”

My sister, Shana, wrote in an email May 10, 2009 about her family’s ranch in Glendive, Montana, “I’ve probably told you about the time a couple of years ago when we had 3 different incidents with people and their ties to this ranch. One was a lady that came and knocked on our door and asked about seeing the old house. She had lived there when she was 2 or 3 years old and told the family story about not having a ramp to load the horse into a trailer, so they led the horse in the living room door, through the house and loaded him off the back step. The next lady came all the way from Florida to see the land that her grandparents had homesteaded. Her father was not yet born when the grandparents lived here, but they had told and written stories about the place. The third one was an old lady who still owned a share in a piece of land within the ranch and her son had died and had asked that part of his ashes be spread on that piece of ground, that he had never seen. The old lady hadn't been here since she was 10 or 11. Some families don't keep track of their own people that much. Yet it is also true that where your family and loved ones are, there is home, and our sense of acceptance is also very tied to who they are and our role in the family.”

Patti Bishoff on moving from a nice, large house to a small apartment on January 31, 2009, said, “Home is not the building, it’s where you and your stuff and loved ones are.”
My Marine Corp nephew, Miles wrote in a letter to my Mom and Dad: “Things have been very busy here, which I suppose is a good thing, it keeps our minds off home, some, anyway.”

My high school students surprised me as they presented their place based art pieces, the triptychs and the Abstract Maps, in that few of them referenced Yellowstone. Is it too mundane for them, losing its uniqueness in its familiarity? Or is it wanting to be anywhere else but here since this is where they grew up? Will they grow up and go away and come back realizing it is a great place to raise children. Is it because Yellowstone is a public, not personal place? One piece did include Electric Peak which is the prominent view in Gardiner and several had generic mountains. Most students chose barns they had played in, lakes from family reunion sites, hunting spots, or their bedrooms. I realized even an Ipod can provide a sense of place as it transports one into a digitized, musical world.

One student also tied in the spiritual, God is a shelter. A sense of place seemed to have different connotations to my students, perhaps because of their age and comparable lack of experiences. At this point, they did not express any sense of place in character development; places were more about enjoyment or relaxation and reflection.

Once I began thinking about a sense of place, I found references to it everywhere. There are many verses in the Holy Bible about it. This is one of my favorites:

Psalm 84 (N. I. V.)

1 How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty!

2 My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.
3 Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar, O LORD Almighty, my King and my God.

4 Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.

We have also been studying the Minor Prophets in a Bible Study led by our pastor and discussing how often a verse will be prophesying three different events, each in a different time, past, present or future—the epitome of time/space compression.

**Gardiner**

Wendell Berry said, "You can't know who you are until you know where you are."

In my quest for why I am so strongly attached to the ranch, I have felt disloyal to the beautiful place my family owns in Gardiner and struggled with the lack of relative attachment to these particular 20 acres of mountainside.
Figure 61, Google Earth Image, 210 Bigelow Lane, Gardiner, MT, 2009

But as I have reflected on a sense of place this past year and applied it to our
present home, I have realized that part of it is lack of time. Even though I have been gone
from the ranch longer than I was there, I was there longer than any other place since, so
far. As I spend time exploring this place, planting gardens, improving it and making my
own space, it’s bound to affect me too. With its spacious house, deck, sand volleyball
court, fire pit, orchard, barns, horses and cats, it has already become a favorite place for
people to gather. Several people have mentioned the reason they feel so at home at our
house is that we ask them to help us with party preparations, thereby giving them a job,
making them a part of the family, giving them a sense of place and belonging.
Figure 62, Virginia McLaughlin, Author’s House, Photo, 2008

Figure 63, Virginia McLaughlin, Author’s Barn, Photo, 2008
And the view from my house cannot be beat.

Figure 64, Virginia McLaughlin, Deck Party, Photo, 2008

Figure 65, Author, Electric Peak, Photo, 2009
And another question I am asking myself is, “How do I influence a sense of place in my vacation rental?” When people come to visit Yellowstone, does their stay in my vacation rental enhance their experience? Or is it just a place to sleep and eat?

![Figure 66, Author, Vacation Rental, Photo, 2008](image)

A Sense of Place Summary

My artwork today is grounded to my attachment to the ranch and its symbols for several reasons. It was the place where I spent my formative years and formed my basic value system. Another rationale for why I have hung onto my heritage is that it does not change, whereas my homes in Gardiner have changed 12 times in 26 years and we have not stayed at any place for more than 6 years.

We take symbols from favorite places to new or undesirable places for memories and comfort. If I see someone in a cowboy hat, even in the middle of a city, I think I should know them. These symbols are romanticized by the entire world. Everyone knows what a cowboy hat means.
The ranch exists within a unique set of values specific to that lifestyle. It is one of the only lifestyles where business and personal life are almost one and the same. Maybe I hang on to a sense of place so strongly because I do not want to be an outsider or disappoint my family by forgetting some subtle nuance of ranch culture or values.

My early life on the ranch seems to have deeply influenced and imbedded itself in my being forever, like a colt, imprinted from birth. Because I understand the influence the ranch had on me, I know who I am at present.

"Doreen Massey relates that ‘A ‘sense of place’, of rootedness, can provide .... stability and a source of unproblematic identity’ (quoted in Cresswell, p. 66).

PROJECT CONCLUSIONS

Great strides were made in the development of my art skills and confidence as an artist which my classroom students will benefit greatly from. I immersed myself in Art, taking painting classes, designing new lesson plans, creating many art projects, getting to know several artists new to the community, bringing in the MT Art Mobile, subscribing to art magazines and exploring art websites. Because of my project I spent time in class working on projects alongside my students. And because of my enthusiasm, they were more excited about their projects this past year than ever before.

But, what began as an effort to create a profusion of art evolved into something so much bigger that it really is not about the art any longer, but how my view of life was shaped by my ranch upbringing and emerged on a larger scale to encompass the world.

My new view of life from a sense of place is changing so quickly that this conclusion can only be a snapshot of where I am today, because tomorrow will bring a
broader, deeper understanding of who I am and how I fit into this world. “Heraclitus of Ephesus (540-480 B.C.) said, “You can never step into the same river; for new waters are always flowing on to you.” I need to adapt to the speed of change in thought and technology and consider which changes I need to embrace and which to ignore.

This change in my perspective is what will really affect my students. As I reflected on who I am, because of my background, I realized that the values I gained from a ranch background influence my classroom and my teaching today.

This project can be mirrored in my classroom. Life necessitates that they learn basic skills and have opportunities to practice them. Life on the ranch taught me the necessity of versatility, which has served me well in my classrooms as I teach a vast variety of Art and Family and Consumer Science skills.

Students must also discover who they are, what they believe and where they come from. Before people can form healthy relationships with others, they must be sure of their own identity and comfortable in their own skin. Then they need to expand their horizons to catch a glimpse of the world and how other people live and think.

Ben Mikaelsen’s Countdown echoes in my memory. It is a children’s book that we listened to on a family trip. It tells the story of Elliot Schroeder, a rancher’s kid from Big Timber, Montana and Vincent Ole Tome, who also cares for his father’s cattle in Kenya. Elliot is chosen for NASA’s junior astronaut program. While orbiting the earth he strikes up a conversation with Vincent via short wave radio. They eventually meet in person and compare their cultural differences and similarities and in the process figure out who they are. This is what I want for my students and I will strive to provide experiences for them that lead them further down their road to self-discovery.
Why is a sense of place so important? A sense of place is as essential to life as water and food, in that it is inherent in shelter and acceptance. We all need some type of shelter from the elements and to know our place in society. Because of this project, I understand my place in our world more clearly.

So where do I go from here?

I go create art, some with horses and cowboy boots, and some without, as I feel so inclined.

I go back to teaching in the Fall, excited to share my view of the world with my classes.

I go explore the world, confident of who I am, where I come from and knowing I have a place to go home to.

I go to Los Angeles, with our Youth Group, to help build a house with Habitat for Humanity and help fix up a summer camp for underprivileged children.

I go branding at the ranch every year, reconnecting with my family, reaffirming who we are and what we do, wielding the branding iron in an artistic manner.

I go play in my garden and celebrate our beautiful place in Gardiner.

I go dancing, in my element......

Figure 67, Author, Sinbad & Warbonnet Ready to Dance, Photo, 2009


Barry, Wendell. [http://web.pdx.edu/~rfenske/Quotes.html](http://web.pdx.edu/~rfenske/Quotes.html)


Heraclitus of Ephesus. [http://thinkexist.com](http://thinkexist.com)
