



The making of an exhibit

A LOOK BEHIND THE SCENES OF WATERMARK'S EXHIBIT PROCESS FROM START TO FINISH

by Sue Bruns special to *in Bemidji* | photos by Annalise Braught

Inside Bemidji's Watermark Art Center on any given day, a visitor might stand in just the right space to get a glimpse of all four Watermark galleries, possibly all in different stages of exhibit installation.

Today, Diamond Knispel's, "Wild Whimsy of the Northwoods" stretches the lengths of Lakeview Gallery, paintings of northland animals and flowers captured in eye-catching splashes of color. In the Marley and Sandy Kaul Gallery, R. J.

Kern's photography exhibition, "The Unchosen Ones" features large canvas portraits of 4-H students with their animals.

In Bemidji State University's Harlow | Kleven Gallery, "A Celebration of Women Artists" acknowledges the historically overlooked talents of some of the world's greatest female potters and printmakers. And in the Miikanan, Watermark's Indigenous art gallery, "Aanikoosijigaade" — It is Linked — features emerging artists Joan Kauppi

and Shaawan Francis Keahna in thought-provoking mixed media.

If that's not enough variety for you, just wait, because exhibits are changed out every two to four months. There's always something new to see.

For the past five years, Watermark has exhibited juried artwork by local, regional and international artists year-round in its four galleries. As a show nears the end of its run, others are queued up on a schedule that stretches out 18 months to two years.

When an exhibition ends, signage is removed, pieces are taken down, packed carefully and shipped back to the artist or on to another gallery, walls are patched and paint is touched up.

Meanwhile another artist's work arrives and installation begins, followed by the exhibit's opening, programming and several weeks of viewing — free to the public.

Visitors to the Watermark bring varying degrees of appreciation for the exhibits, but most give little thought to the process that brings these exhibitions to life.

The center's executive director, Lori Forshee-Donnay, coordinates and facilitates the processes for all four galleries and is responsible for the Kaul and Lakeview exhibits, while Miikanan exhibitions are managed by Program Director Karen Goulet.

BSU Art Gallery Director Laura Goliaszewski manages both the BSU Harlow | Kleven Gallery at Watermark and BSU's Talley Gallery on campus.

HOW AN EXHIBIT IS SELECTED

A few shows are regulars at the Watermark like the annual middle and high school spring exhibits and "It's Only Clay," a national competition and exhibition held each year. The Bi-Annual Members Show features artwork by Watermark members in various mediums and is held every other year.

Other exhibits are proposed by an artist, a group or an organization through an application process. Proposals include samples of the artist's works and information about the artist. Lori oversees the process and makes sure the exhibit committee has all the information needed to rank the proposals.



Bemidji State Art Gallery Director Laura Goliaszewski packs up pottery items from the "Art as Mirror" exhibit to install the "A Celebration of Women Artists" exhibit on display through May 19 in BSU's Harlow | Kleven Gallery at Watermark.

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“Exhibits are selected based on their merits — originality of work, command of the medium, and strength and execution of their exhibit concept.”

- Watermark Executive Director Lori Forshee-Donnay



Watermark Executive Director Lori Forshee-Donnay, left, and Mike Ohl discuss where art for an upcoming exhibit should be hung.

Committee member Gillian Bedford said the team goes over all artwork and applications that Watermark receives, examines the artists' statements and proposals, and ranks them for possible exhibition at Watermark.

“Exhibits are selected based on their merits — originality of work, command of the medium, and strength and execution of their exhibit concept,” Lori said. “These are the three main things that determine whether an exhibit proposal will move forward or not.”

Once a proposal is accepted, she contacts the artist to work out the details and schedule the exhibit.

“A lot of factors influence that decision,” Lori said regarding the preparedness of the artist, the artist's schedule and Watermark's calendar.

Planning for upcoming exhibitions is also determined by the style, theme, number of pieces and mediums used, so that there is variety from one show to another. It's unlikely, for example, that two photography exhibits or two sculpture exhibits will run consecutively.



R.J. Kern's exhibit "The Unchosen Ones: Portraits of an American Pastoral" is on display through March 25 in the Kaul Gallery at Watermark Art Center.

Another factor that has to be addressed is insurance on the displayed pieces. Lori works with the artists and the insurers to determine values of individual pieces in case something is lost or broken while it is at the center.

EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE

Occasionally an exhibit will be selected for the Kaul or Lakeview Gallery in other ways.

“We are sometimes approached by other art organizations and asked to host a particular show like the Surface Design Associations Annual Members Show,” Lori added, “and sometimes artists or guilds propose a group show or even create their own concept of a juried show as Mary Therese did in 2022 with her 'Umbrellas of Unity' exhibit.”

The BSU Harlow | Kleven Gallery does three four-month exhibits per year, drawing from BSU's 1,600-piece collection of prints and ceramic

sculptures from some of the best artists in the world, a collection donated by Margaret Harlow and Lillie Kleven. Laura Goliaszewski draws from this collection to build exhibits.

“I start with a theme,” she detailed, “and then try to find things that reflect that theme.”

From there, she selects 12-14 prints and 10-14 pieces of ceramics from the collection to include in the exhibition. Some of the prints are not framed, so she mats and frames them. A BSU student assists with transporting, taking down and displaying the pieces.

THE MIIKANAN - MANY PATHS

Program Director Karen Goulet is well-connected for bringing Indigenous artists' work to the Miikanan.

“We had to establish ourselves,” she said. “This is the first Native American art gallery in this region. We're always seeking out artists to bring in.

“The priority for me is to show

diversity in the art forms that are available, so then it's reaching out and finding artists who are painters or sculptors or (work with) fiber or textiles — sort of a rhythm — going back and forth between traditional and contemporary. I like to change it up because there are not a lot of venues for Native artists.”

Karen said Miikanan works with many new and emerging artists and has gone from doing a lot of group exhibits to solo and two-person shows.

“We do a lot with artists who are moving forward in their professional lives, which is really fun to do,” she added.

Recently closed, Gaa-Miinigoowiziyang — “What We Were Given” was a group exhibit by Manidoo Ogitigaan, a Native American grassroots organization based in Bemidji with connections across the United States and Canada.

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Karen said exhibits like this are important because they show artists who are learning a traditional art form. She reached out to the organization because she wanted to make their work more visible.

“Part of my role is to challenge the notion of art versus craft. I think that creativity is its own voice,” Karen said, differentiating on the basis of the work’s caliber.

Pointing out the variety between works displayed in the previous exhibit and the current one, she noted, “diversity is important in the kind of exhibits we have and the authenticity of the artist’s voice. My job is to show people it doesn’t have to fall into a formula to be Indigenous art.”

ART INSTALLATION

Mike Ohl, retired art instructor and Watermark exhibit committee member, does much of the installation in the center’s three galleries. He helps Karen and Lori with exhibit installations and has been invaluable in helping trouble-shoot some of the trickier ones.

Details like how and where the pieces will be placed, spacing of the work and lighting are an integral part of exhibit installation.

Prior to installing Diamond Knispel’s exhibition in Lakeview, the walls were prepared: nail holes, patched; walls, spot-painted. Mike and Lori then lined up Diamond’s paintings along the walls according to her prescribed order — from early morning, progressing through the day as captured in her paintings.

Mike used a laser level to line up the paintings on the walls and hung them at 57 inches on center with ample spacing between them to allow the viewer to focus on each.

Meanwhile, Lori focused on the informational text Diamond had sent with her paintings, which would be printed, mounted on core board and placed. Lori said the text provided by Diamond — in a Microsoft Word document or Excel spreadsheet — makes it easy to edit or reformat if needed.

But installation is about more than just hanging pieces on a wall or placing them on pedestals. Laura referred to a study that estimated the average museum-goer spends just nine seconds looking at a piece of art.

The number of items needs to make sense for the space, and she strives to set up exhibits that will slow the viewers down to give them time to interact with and think about each piece.

“I want there to be space,” she said, “so that people don’t scan.”

She creates an environment to help the artist say what they want to say and a place for people to view the art without a lot of distracting graphics.

“Part of my role is to challenge the notion of art versus craft. I think that creativity is its own voice.”

- Program Director Karen Goulet



A variety of tools are required when swapping out exhibits at the Watermark Art Center.

EXHIBIT OPENINGS AND OTHER PROGRAMMING

Selecting, planning, scheduling, promoting and installing all happen before the public sees the exhibits. From start (proposal or idea for an exhibit) to finish (installation), the process may take anywhere from months to years. Karen said Miikanan is booked about two years out, which is typical of the Kaul and the Lakeview Galleries as well.

Since Laura is working with an existing collection and building exhibits from those pieces, the process for the BSU Gallery is a little different. She usually plans out a year’s worth of exhibits at a time, and as soon as one is up, she’s matting, framing and researching the artists for the next one.

Only one exhibit here has

included work from outside the Harlow | Kleven collection: a retirement farewell exhibition for BSU Professor Natalia Himmirska in 2020.

Exhibits are promoted well in advance of their openings — part of the job of Watermark’s Communications Director Lisa Seter. Usually an opening involves a welcome and presentation by the artist. Often programming accompanies the exhibit. When R. J. Kern’s exhibition opened, for example, the photographer presented a pin-hole camera-making workshop.

When an exhibit ends, the work isn’t over. Pieces are packed up and shipped off, walls are patched and painted again, the entire cycle continues and visitors return to view new works. ■

How an artist prepares for an exhibit

R.J. Kern has been exhibiting his work since 2014, both across the U.S. and internationally. He started work on “The Unchosen Ones” in 2015, took most of the initial photographs in 2016, and exhibited in Bemidji in 2020. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, “The Unchosen Ones” was seen only online or through the windows of the Watermark.

Since then, he has extended the project with 50 “four-years-later” follow-up portraits of some of his original subjects and published his monograph “The Unchosen Ones: Portraits of an American Pastoral” in 2021. The current exhibit at Watermark includes pairings of some of his original portraits and the more recent shots of those subjects.

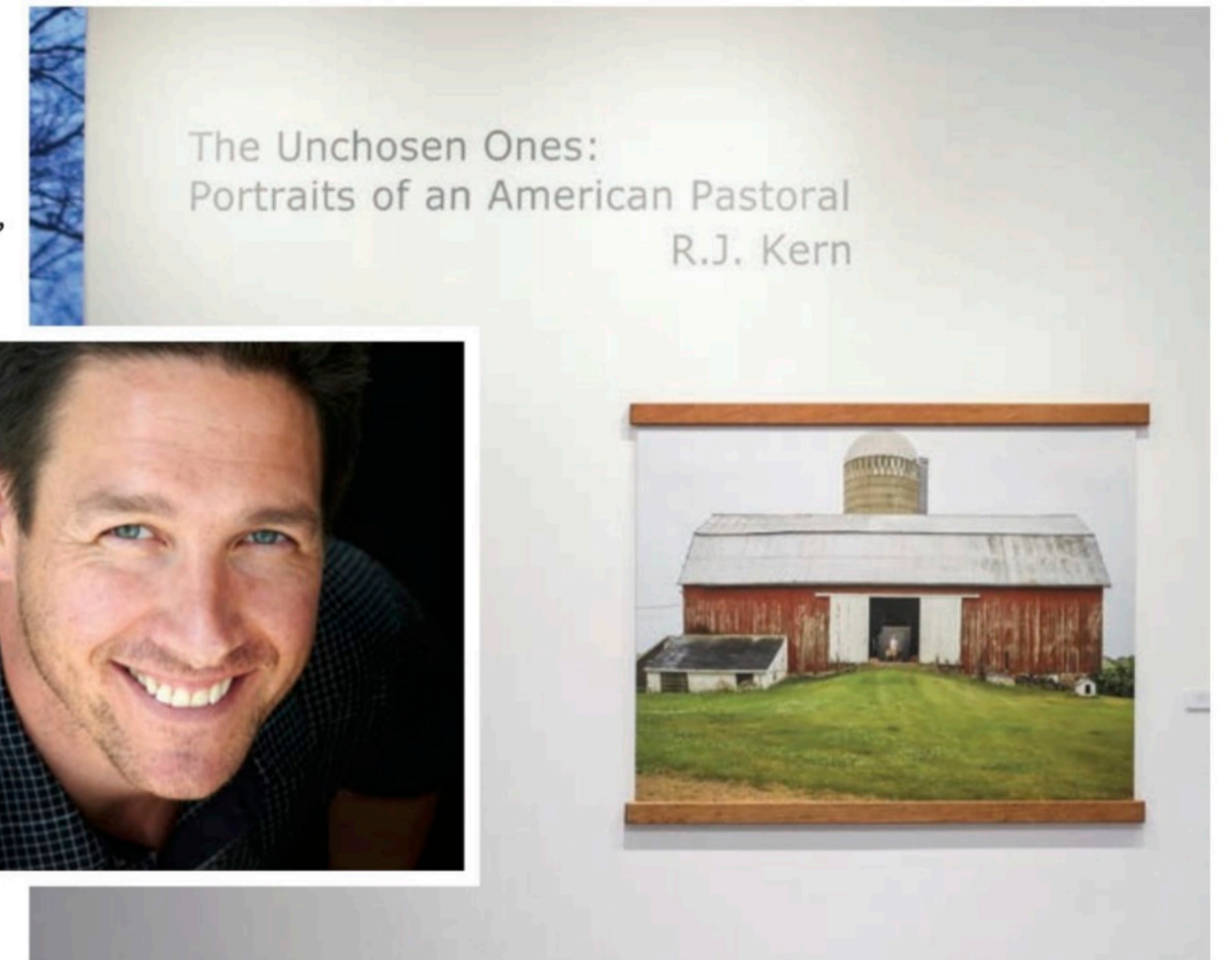
In preparing for an exhibit, R.J. thinks about new audiences that will resonate with his projects and approaches venues that seem to be good matches.

“To book one of my exhibitions, a signed agreement and retainer is required, which guarantees availability of the work with a precise budget and timeline, and my time and energy to be available for artist talks, book signings, panel discussions, and workshops tied to the exhibition,” R.J. said.

He ships his touring pieces as unframed canvas prints that can be rolled up and shipped in cases with wheels and handles. Installation involves top and bottom frame pieces that hold the canvas in place with powerful magnets.

“Venues get creative control of the installation of the work,” he added. “Sometimes I will send additional exhibition prints to choose from, which offers venues greater curatorial control.”

R.J. said he is “a fan of bringing the art to the people,” since most of this project was created outside the Twin Cities metro and was originally funded by a Minnesota State Arts Board grant.



R.J. Kern’s exhibit “The Unchosen Ones: Portraits of an American Pastoral” is on display through March 25 in the Kaul Gallery at Watermark Art Center.

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