

## ***Concerning Place: A Bumper Crop of Talent in Central Washington***

by Fionn Meade



*images left to right:*

**Justin Beckman**, *Back Door*, b&w photograph, 2004

**John Pena**, *Hope*, color photograph, 2003

**Stephen Chalmers**, *N 47.50743° W 121.90196°*, color photograph

The visual arts exhibits at this year's Bumbershoot Arts Festival, August 30-September 5, will feature an innovative show that seeks to dispel some cliché notions about contemporary artists living on the other side of the mountains. *Re-Contextualized Vistas: Concerning Place*, curated by Donna Stack (media artist and Artist Trust grant recipient), will present eight artists (primarily from Central Washington) that are "living in the East for what it has to offer and traveling to the West for what it has to offer as well," says Stack.

Working in experimental formats and often with conceptual themes, Stack has invited each to explore her thesis that "a hybrid group of artists exists whose landscape and community conform to an alternative perspective " to the romantic notion of artisan art and rodeo towns often associated with Ellensburg and surrounding towns. A risk-taking concept to organize a show around and one that promises to be well worth checking out.

For the exhibit, each artist has been asked create work that deals with their notion of place as viewed from an opening or single vista, working from the premise that the resulting work will challenge preconceived notions of place within Washington as each contributing artist re-presents and explores a specific idea of landscape within a contemporary context. The first three days of the visual arts exhibit at Bumbershoot are free, so don't miss an opportunity to see what this talented group produces.

When I emailed some of the artists that will be in the show and asked them to talk about what's so great about being an artist living in Central Washington, the responses were remarkably similar, lending further credence to Stack's bold thesis. To a person, each remarked on the enthusiasm for art and artists that exists in Ellensburg, as well as the immediate access to natural beauty and a close-knit network of friends and resources. Interdisciplinary artist and designer Justin Beckman moved to Ellensburg temporarily from Los Angeles—where he received his B.F.A. at Art Center, Pasadena (one of the country's more highly regarded art schools)—and found the dramatic change invigorating. "I became enchanted with the natural beauty of the Kittitas Valley which, combined with cheap rent, a thriving arts scene, and the generous nature of the local residents, has helped me call Ellensburg "home" for almost four years now." In addition to showing his own work at various venues around the State, Beckman also opened a gallery space in downtown Ellensburg and publishes a great magazine, *Punch*, which together have served as a catalyst for contemporary art and design in the community.

Howard Barlow and Justin Gibbens, two artists who live in nearby Thorp, WA, chose to renovate their respective homes into live/work spaces (Barlow converted the old Thorp Fire House into a studio) and pursue showing their work around the State but with Central Washington as their home base. In addition to the Bumbershoot show, they jointly organized a highly successful show at SOIL Art Gallery, *History and Prophecy: A Modern Day Bestiary*, which was up earlier this summer. Both Barlow and Gibbens have work slated to appear in a host of upcoming fall shows around the State.

Debbie Young, who was born and raised in rural Central Washington, feels that her work as a contemporary artist responding to her environment benefits immeasurably from being removed but within striking distance of a major city. "I feel like I have the best of both worlds, a quiet environment in which I can focus on my work as well as an activity-filled metropolitan area within a couple hours" says Young. She also mentions the importance of Gallery One, a nonprofit exhibition space in downtown Ellensburg, and the well-attended First Fridays Art

Walk organized by local galleries and cafes as essential to artists in the area, "We exchange studio visits and feedback with each other on a regular basis and really have a vibrant community of committed artists and friends."

Sculptor Renee Adams also mentions Gallery One as integral but points to the undergraduate and graduate programs at Central Washington University as playing an equally important part in sustaining a strong arts scene. "Our friendships have spurred us to put together successful exhibition proposals," relates Adams, a part-time instructor at CWU (where Stack is a full-time professor of sculpture). "But living here allows time more than anything else, time to work in an affordable studio space, time to spend with other local artists talking about art, politics and each other's work, while even having enough time to lend a hand remodeling each other's houses or studio spaces."

As one Ellensburg artist added, a factor not to be ignored in the burgeoning arts scene is the influx of new faculty members at Central Washington with strong studio practices in the visual arts and a shared excitement for the local art scene, Joan CawleyCrane, Brian Goeltzenleuchter, Ovidio Giberga, and Stephen Chalmers among them. Other recent graduates of note include conceptual artist John Peña and Joel Brenden, a comic artist working with other artists to inaugurate the first Ellensburg Film Festival later this coming October. All further evidence that Central Washington's contemporary art scene is alive and thriving.



images left to right:

**Brian Goeltzenleuchter**, *Unpacking Iraq*, four stills from flash animation, 2004

**Debbie Young**, *Spiraling Water Pillar*, Copper & Patina, 10'x1.5'x1.5', 2004

**Justin Gibbens**, *Crow with Crutch*, graphite/watercolor on paper, 6"x9", 2004

For more information on the Ellensburg art scene and some of its excellent artists, visit the following websites:

[www.ellensburg.ws](http://www.ellensburg.ws)

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

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

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

[www.johnpena.net](http://www.johnpena.net)

[www.cphomedecor.com/brian/index.php](http://www.cphomedecor.com/brian/index.php)

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

[www.cwu.edu/~art/](http://www.cwu.edu/~art/)