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Sarah Cain's 'Mountain Song' unveiled on Snowmass Ski Area



Andrew Travers
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Tony Priky/Courtesy photo |

Sarah Cain's "Mountain Song" was unveiled Thursday at Elk Camp restaurant on the Snowmass Ski Area.

Sarah Cain describes her massive new site-responsive mural in the Elk Camp Restaurant as "loud," befitting the hectic and bustling ski season scene in the mid-mountain hub on the Snowmass Ski Area.

The California-based artist is excited about her piece setting the scene in the cafeteria-style dining hall filed with families, hot cocoa-sipping skiers and Champagne-popping vacationers.

"I like the idea of the work on site becoming part of the noise of the environment," she explained.

Titled "Mountain Song," the new mural was unveiled to the public on Thanksgiving as ski season opened on the Snowmass Ski Area. It fills a wall just under 30 feet long and just over 9 feet tall. Curated by the Aspen Art Museum since the 2012-13 season, the mural wall has previously hosted works by Shinique Smith, Teresita Fernandez and Dave Muller.

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IF YOU GO...

What: Sarah Cain's 'Mountain Song'

Where: Elk Camp Restaurant, Snowmass Ski Area

When: Nov. 24, 2017 through Sept. 30, 2018

More info: <http://www.aspenartmuseum.org>

What: Sarah Cain artist talk with Heidi Zuckerman

Where: Aspen Art Museum

When: Friday, Feb. 16, 5 p.m.

More info: <http://www.aspenartmuseum.org>

Cain's three-dimensional piece is uncontained by the wall or by the four canvases she's affixed to it. The work's vibrant, cheerful colors and ecstatic graffiti gestures spill from canvas to canvas and pop off the wall. Depending on how you look at it, there can be seven or eight or more distinct paintings colliding within "Mountain Song." Cain has liberated one of her canvases, flipping it and leaving its backside and stretcher bars facing out. Rectangular bits of the canvas are cut and braided. The wild action of the abstract piece is grounded a bit in thick black borders at its top and bottom, in a stolid black circle at its lower left and in its series of mountain-like mound figures that suggest a day-glo sunset over purple peak.

Cain spent a week in October at Elk Camp driving up the sloppy, wet and muddy summer road, aiming to finish her work before the snow began to fly and spending days working on what would become "Mountain Song." She was joined by Anderson Ranch's Josh Meier, with whom she'd worked on a printmaking project on a prior visit to Aspen.

"It was a great sort of mind cleanse driving up there," Cain said. "The first couple times it seemed really crazy and scary, but it morphed into being beautiful and peaceful."

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Cain spotted a gray wolf on the mountainside and relished the clean mountain air (she'd come from installing a piece in the Bay Area and battling smoke during the wildfires in the region).

She sent four canvases to Snowmass from California in advance, with some paint already on them, and had some ideas for her mural. But she quickly tossed out those notions. The work was largely improvisational.

"We just figured it out," she said. "I didn't know what it was going to look like at all. It resolved itself on site. It was fun."

Working in the moment, without a detailed plan, Cain moved canvases inside and outside layering acrylic and gouache and spray paint, building the mural piece by piece. Often, Cain said, the act of creation begins with destruction. On her second day working on site, for instance, she aggressively laid waste to one quickly finished section.

"It started off as the most elegant painting ever and then by the end of the day I had just totally terrorized it, which is part of my painting process," she explained. "Sometimes I feel like if the work looks too great in the beginning it holds me up. I have to sort of risk it, just to clear my brain and not have any sense of preciousness attached it."

One of the signature gestures in Cain's large murals is braiding pieces of canvas. She often paints both sides, then cuts stretches of canvas and twists them together to make rainbows of braided color. The eight braided sections of "Mountain Song" got an unexpected boost from Elk Camp itself: positioned below a heating vent, many of the braids gently sway with the constant push of ventilated air.

Cain didn't know they were going to move, as she was often painting inside a plastic bubble that protected the carpet, but was excited about this surprise aspect of the work.

Braiding began for Cain as a grounding personal routine. The first thing she does when she gets to work in her studio, she said, is braid her hair in the hopes of keeping paint out of it. About seven years ago, she started experimenting with braiding in the murals themselves (the canvas braids are even bound with hair ties).

"There's this random chance quality of where you cut it and what's going to come through," she said.

The Snowmass piece follows Cain's much talked about "Now I'm Going to Tell You Everything," a similarly styled three-dimensional mural on brick she installed this fall in the courtyard of the new Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. It has quickly become a popular selfie destination and a frequently-Instagrammed L.A. spot. "Mountain Song" is likely to become a similar draw on Snowmass.

Along with the on-site mural, Cain hung 12 small paintings on dollar bills on a wall in the stairway beside "Mountain Song." Placed vertically, each is intricately painted and decorated but tiny bits of the iconography on the original bills are untouched — leaving a bit of George Washington here, a pyramid and a creepy Eye of Providence there. Cain said she brought these works along because she wanted to play with viewers' perspective: while you can view the mural from afar and from across the restaurant, these dollar bill paintings require intimate and up-close inspection.

Cain hasn't included any visual representations of snow sports in her Elk Camp mural. However, snowboarding is very much in her soul. Cain grew up in upstate New York and, she recalled, was an avid snowboarder beginning at age 12 when she rode a Kemper board with cloth bindings (eventually she proudly sported a Burton with a bumper sticker on it that read "Keep Your Rosaries Out of My Ovaries").

"That was my whole life: snowboarding," she said.

But by the time she was 16, making art and drawing was overtaking snowboarding as her primary passion. So she gave up snowboarding and its constant risk of wrist injuries.

"I started locking into my drawing and I was like, 'I can't injure my hand,'" she recalled.

But Cain is tempted, she said, to get back on her board and ride with Aspen Art Museum director Heidi Zuckerman in February, when Cain will be back in town for an event at the Aspen Art Museum.

atravers@aspen-times.com

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