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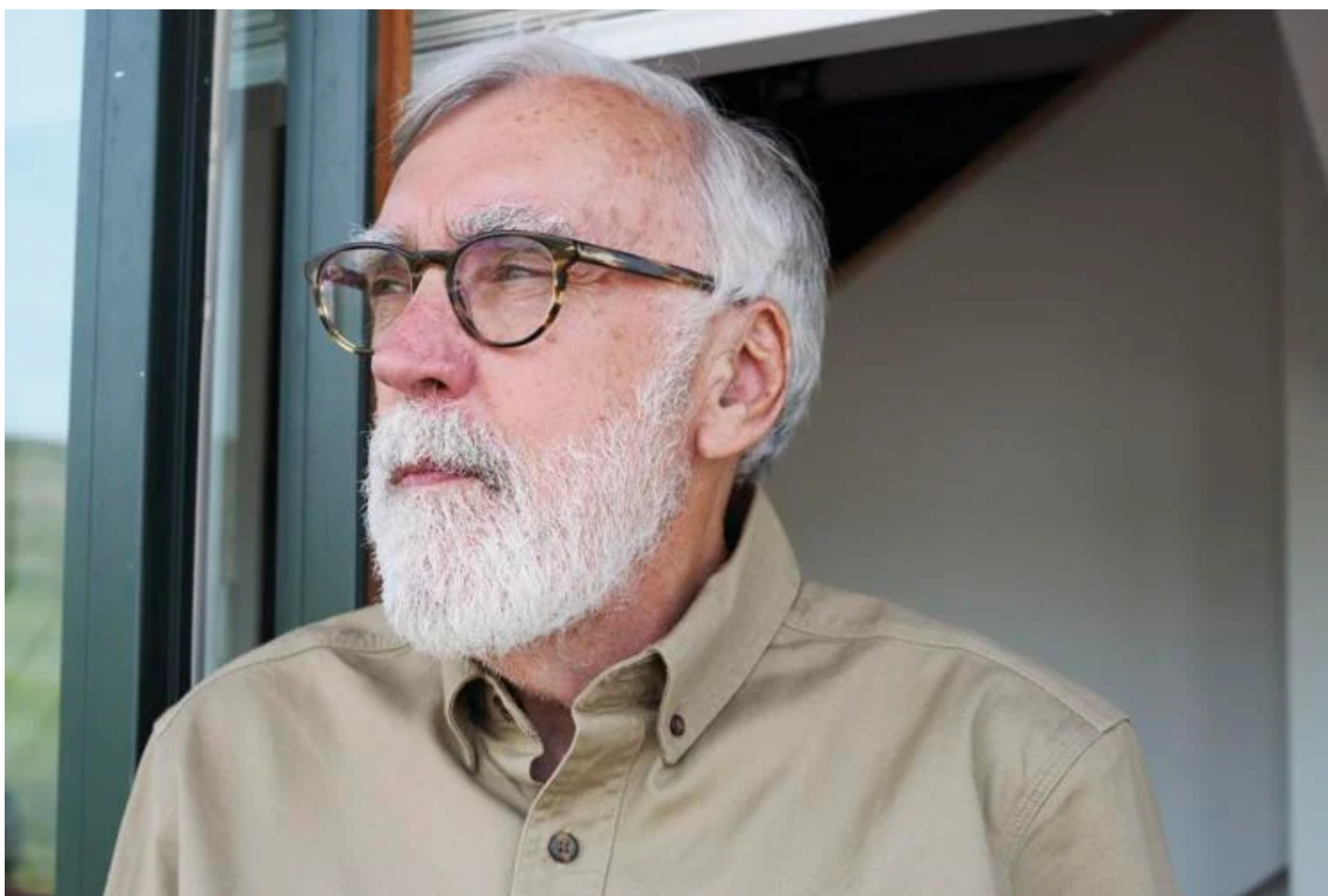


FEATURED



Going against the grain: Artist hosts exhibition in Wyarno grain elevator

By Caroline Elik | caroline.elik@thesheridanpress.com Aug 11, 2023 Updated Aug 11, 2023



Thomas Faulkner at his Wyarno grain elevator studio, Thursday, Aug. 10, 2023. Faulkner is a native of New York but has used the grain elevator as a summer studio for decades. Caroline Elik | The Sheridan Press

MORE INFORMATION



Faulkner to present art in Wyarno

WYARNO — Sculptor and photographer Thomas Faulkner's solo exhibition opens Aug. 12 at the grain elevator in Wyarno, 11 miles east of Sheridan ...



WYARNO — In the unincorporated community of Wyarno sits a piece of local history — a grain elevator built adjacent to railroad tracks in 1930. Now, instead of storing grain, it holds the creations of Thomas Faulkner, an artist known for his large-scale and often controversial work.

Beginning Saturday, Faulkner will host a gallery exhibition entitled “Reclaiming the West” at the grain elevator. The exhibition will showcase works of sculpture and photography that confront the complexity of the West’s history, natural resources and culture.

Faulkner, a New York native, came to Wyoming 35 years ago to visit a friend and fell in love with the rugged landscape. While visiting, his friend told him one of the only buildings in Wyarno — the grain elevator — was for sale.

Living among the vast Wyoming plains with freight trains as your closest neighbors isn’t for the faint of heart. But when Faulkner heard about the grain elevator, his mind was made up. He purchased it for an “astounding sum” of \$2,500 and converted it into a summer studio space, complete with a living area and kitchen. Now, when Faulkner, his wife Brenda Husson and their two dogs aren’t in New York, they’re among tall grass and wildflowers in Wyarno.

“I saw a remarkable opportunity ... and it’s been a wonderful studio. I’ve used it sometimes just for a couple of weeks in the summer, and sometimes for three months,” Faulkner said. “People ask us about the trains, too. We love them.”

Faulkner grew up in the suburbs of New York City and didn’t discover the depths of his creativity until young adulthood. He enrolled at Dartmouth College with the intention of eventually becoming a lawyer, but found himself unhappy at the school. He took two years off from his studies and started working at an Episcopal church in the South Bronx.

During his hiatus from school, Faulkner also spent time traveling to various destinations in Europe. It was there that his interest in art began to manifest more clearly — but even then, he never considered making it, only appreciating it.

It wasn’t until his return to Dartmouth that Faulkner finally realized he’d been harboring artistic abilities all along.

“I took one art course, and it just exploded my world,” he said. “All of a sudden, I discovered I had talent that I didn’t know about, and I had a remarkable interest in doing art.”

What came next was a whirlwind, he said. Faulkner won a major art award his junior year at Dartmouth and was accepted into the Yale School of Art. But he decided not to attend — instead, he decided to pursue another passion: Episcopal priesthood. After completing seminary school, he went back to pursuing art and graduated with a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. He was also an artist-in-residence in 1986 at the Ucross Foundation, around 30 miles down the road from Wyarno.

For decades since then, Faulkner’s time has been split between art and preaching — but his two worlds are more intertwined than one may think.

Faulkner’s beliefs as a priest inspire much of what he does as an artist, and his art is almost always focused on religious, cultural and political issues. His “Reclaiming the West” exhibition displays sculpture and photography works that mainly draw inspiration from pollution, climate change and the historically violent relationship between Native Americans and early U.S. settlers.

The exhibition has been two years in the making and required a hefty amount of logistical planning. Some larger pieces of Faulkner’s artworks had to be shipped from New York to Wyoming in special crates and had to be assembled when they arrived.

One of the largest and most central pieces in the exhibition is a 10-foot tall sculpture entitled “Roadkill.” According to the artwork’s description, it’s meant to comment on the doctrine of “manifest destiny,” government-forced relocation of Native Americans and Christian complicity in the dehumanization of American Indians.

“Increasingly over the years there has been awareness of the importance of this part of Wyoming in regards to conflict between white Europeans and the Native people,” Faulkner said. “I find there tends to be an attitude that I find unsettling ... of being friendly, and finding educational opportunities and business opportunities, etc. for Native peoples, all of which I completely affirm and applaud. But there’s also a shying away from the truth of what we did.”

Faulkner said he’s well aware that displaying controversial artwork in an overwhelmingly right-leaning state may evoke negative reactions in viewers. But he doesn’t shy away from that — he wants people to sit with the artwork, contemplate it and talk about it.

“His work has always been unsettling,” Husson said. “It’s meant to provoke a response. Sure, it’s great when someone looks at him and says, ‘I love that’ ... but it’s so much better when someone says, ‘I’m troubled by this. I don’t understand it.’ And as an artist, you can talk with them about that.”

Faulkner said at first glance, some of his artworks may appear offensive, but it’s necessary for people to read the description of each work so they can understand what the message of it is.

Angie Rispoli, a longtime friend of Faulkner’s, said his artwork ultimately reflects the influence faith has on his life. She said it often forces viewers to think of others before themselves, which allows people to broaden their perspectives.

“There’s a world beyond us that we’re called to be a part of, to minister to and challenge. Speaking as a Christian, as a believer ... that is consistent in his work,” Rispoli said. “He’s very real. He’s a deeply human person.”

Faulkner’s “Reclaiming the West” exhibition will run Aug. 12-19 from 1 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. daily at the grain elevator, located at 1030 Wyarno Road. The exhibition is free and open to the public. Faulkner will also host an artist’s talk Aug. 16 from 7-8 p.m. at the Wyarno Bar and Grill, and an artist’s reception at the grain elevator Aug. 17 from 5:30-7 p.m.

Caroline Elik is the education and sports reporter for The Sheridan Press.

