

Entertainer: 10 things to do in western Montana

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Geographer Steven Holloway “maps” printmaking 2 of 11



KURT WILSON, Missoulian

Trained as a cartographer, Steven Holloway blends his artistic skills with his map-making background to create prints that “inform us about the beauty of a place, the song of a place.”

The kind of maps Steven Holloway makes might not tell you so much about where you want to go as they do about where you are.

The Missoula printmaking artist has a professional background in geography, having made maps for everything from real estate and geology to highways and social and wildlife data. He also taught cartography at the University of Montana.

“I was a geographer and I’m still a geographer at heart,” Holloway said.

The trouble with what most people currently think of when they picture a map is that each of them has an embedded agenda to them, Holloway said. Today, Google Maps is the standard for people looking for locations or directions.

“And it is telling us over and over and over again what the place is. It’s giving us an agenda, and it’s

a corporate agenda,” Holloway said.

Stores, for example, appear in search results according to an amount they paid to be listed in, he said. And the domination in route instructions is in roads to be driven on by cars.

“It has an agenda that says ‘This is the way we move,’ ” Holloway said.

In 2000, Holloway took a map of Missoula and chose 40 locations along the Clark Fork River, then spent the year visiting each place multiple times, collecting thousands of photos and notes.

“When I got back my whole sense of what it was to map had changed,” he said. “The possibilities are infinite, and maps can respond to that. They can inform us about the beauty of a place, the song of a place.”

He took inspiration from a quote by Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, “For a future to be possible,” and created a work called “Right Map Making” laying out some of the tenets he felt maps should abide by.

He took the piece to a national cartographic conventions, and received very divided feedback. Some thought it was great, and wanted copies to hang on their walls. Others called it blasphemous.

“There is a thought of, If someone wants a map of a uranium mine on a wilderness area, you give it to them, they paid for it,” he said.

He creates his artwork in a studio in the backyard of a house he owns in the University District neighborhood. The studio was once a two-story barn that he converted into a place to house his drawing tables and tools, print press and lithographic limestones, two of which weigh more than 300 pounds each.

Holloway is currently in the middle of working on a new print about the Three Forks area, adding in different layers over a drawing of the rivers.

“There’s not just a cement plant and a highway there. There’s the sound of the trains going by,” he said.

Growing up canoeing in northern Minnesota, Holloway said he makes connections to the land through its waterways, which often serve as a jumping off point for new artwork about a place. While working as an artist in residence in Berkeley, he spent time trying to find the streams that fed into the bay. They had all been covered up, and put into man-made channels underground.

The search to find them became “The Wound.” The print shows a series of parallel channels, Holloway’s response to what happened to the natural flow of Berkeley’s water.

“Less and less I think of myself as making maps - more that I am responding to real places,” he said.

Sometimes, Holloway’s visits to a place never materialize into a piece of art. He said there’s one location along the Flathead River he stops, making notes and taking pictures with a pinhole camera he made himself, every time he makes the trip between his studio in Missoula and where his wife lives and works north of Spokane.

“I’ve been stopping there for five years, and the response still hasn’t emerged,” he said. “I didn’t know when I started out what was going to happen, I just knew a map could be something very different.”