

Stone: Stunning moments: gobsmacked and speechless



Sometimes you get gobsmacked by art.

Yes, I said "gobsmacked" and I use that bit of British slang on purpose, because it isn't an ordinary word and I'm talking about non-ordinary experiences: moments when you are caught by surprise, stunned, astonished, knocked sideways, forced to stop and think and re-evaluate.

Gobsmacked.

By art.

That happened to me several times this summer.

The most recent was a few weeks ago at a party where, we had been informed (or, to my way of thinking, forewarned) that there would be a

performance by an opera singer.

Now, as an uncultured boor, I know what I like ... and opera ain't on the list.

But I really love the people who were throwing the party and the food's always great at their place — so if they wanted to subject me to a little opera, well, I was willing to make the sacrifice. (I'm really one hell of a guy.)

And so, when we were all herded into the living room for the performance, I sat down, ready to do my bit with as little squirming as I could manage.

Then the young woman standing at the front of the room began to sing.

And I was ... well, gobsmacked.

Blythe Gaissert looked like an ordinary human being — a beautiful young woman, which is one of my favorite kinds of human beings, but still there was nothing in her appearance to hint at the astonishing, relaxed power and beauty of her voice.

She sang for perhaps half an hour and I was entranced. No squirming. Not the least little bit — though I did turn and look out the window for a while at the sunlight playing on aspen leaves tossed by the breeze: the beauty of music and the beauty of the mountains.

I realize all the hard work and dedication that go into achieving something as effortlessly superb as her voice — but still it seemed like one of nature's simple miracles.

No, I won't be sprinting off to the opera on a regular basis. But my eyes have been opened. My horizons expanded.

The second stunning moment came when I went to Dick Carter's art opening at his pop-up gallery on Midland Avenue in Basalt.

I've known and admired Carter for years, as a person and an artist. And when I say "artist," I mean "painter," because that's what he does. He paints.

But this show was photography — and, frankly, I expected Carter might be a little lost in this new medium.

I doubled down on that expectation because the show was entirely photos taken out the window of his car on trips between Aspen and L.A. Shot with his iPhone. Without stopping the car.

I mean, come on.

So I showed up to offer a little support to an old friend as he stumbled into a new arena.

And I was prepared to do that very graciously because — ahem! — I have long considered myself a bit of a photographer. Carter was marching into my territory, so I was ready to offer encouragement to the new kid.

Then, damn it, I was gobsmacked again.

Because Dick Carter is an artist not in the sense of "painter." He is an artist in the truest and largest sense: someone who has a mind and an eye and a heart that recognizes and synthesizes and creates and communicates with whatever materials come to hand.

I can't tell you how his pictures were different from the pictures I would have taken out that same windshield with that same iPhone on that same drive — but they were.

His are art. Mine would have been a waste of time.

And, as with Blythe Gaissert's singing, Dick Carter's photographs left me enlightened and humbled.

My third gobsmacking experience happened months ago, but it remains so alive in my memory that when I started thinking about the other two events, this third one came immediately to mind.

It was reading Joe Henry's book, "Lime Creek."

Now, just as I went into Carter's photo show thinking I was a bit of a photographer, so I dug into "Lime Creek" thinking I was a bit of a writer. And, just as looking at Dick Carter's photos taught me a lot about photography, so reading Joe Henry's book taught me a lot about writing.

I churn out these columns in a couple of hours, slapdash and stuck together with a bit of spit and a few cheap jokes.

Joe writes with care, dedication and determination — and just as the spit and slapdash show in my columns, Joe's hard work shows in his book.

"Lime Creek" is about the American West. It takes that eternal myth of the cowboy and carries it from almost a century ago into just about right now — and along the way, it shakes the dust off the myth and turns it into something more than just mythical. Something real. Real and yet so immense and strong and exact that it moves beyond reality.

It's a story of men and women and horses (and I really don't give a damn about horses) and — looming above all, embracing all — the fierce Wyoming mountains.

I said it's a story, but "story" isn't quite the word. "Lime Creek" is a slim handful of episodes connected intimately and exquisitely by emotion and family and life — so much life they don't need a "story."

The people and their lives are both astonishing and ordinary in equal measure. No, not equal measure: entirely. Entirely ordinary and entirely astonishing.

Joe Henry starts from bone-deep knowledge of what he is writing about. And then, word by word, moment by moment, thought by thought, he assembles a world. Summer and bitter winter. Life, death, harvest, love.

I don't know how he does it. I can't even do a good job writing about it.

But that's the nature of art.

To create something so extraordinary that it is exactly and only what it is.

I can no more write about Joe Henry's writing than I can take a picture about Blythe Gaissert's singing or sing about Dick Carter's photographs.

I can only stand in awe and admiration.

Gobsmacked.

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