

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



7 / Bill McBride, sculptor, architect, naturalist, Matfield Green, Kansas

In 2004, Bill McBride followed his instincts and moved with his family to Matfield Green to be a full-time sculptor and live surrounded by the tallgrass prairie. He came from Chicago where he had founded the architectural firm of McBride Kelley Baurer and he designed churches and commercial buildings; schools and private homes; urban design projects; and historic projects such as the restoration of the Wrigley Building. He made art ever since his schooldays but not “professionally” --although many of his creations ended up by being bought, with the proceeds going to good causes. He was active in the city where he is remembered for his efforts at restoring and preserving its waterfront, and as co-founder of Riverbank Neighbors and a board member of Friends of the Chicago River. One of his Chicago-days art pieces was ‘Hey Diddle Diddle’, the wildly popular cow jumping over the moon, which found a place in front of the Wrigley Building in 1999, during the Cows on Parade art festival; this sculpture, too, was donated for charity auction.

Bill is a “community man.” His firm’s mission was “to embrace the power of design to create places that serve people, delight the senses, and celebrate our bonds to the earth and to each other.” These core values are also reflected in his life as an active member of the small community of Matfield Green. Six years ago, he was the one that set out the course to buy the historic Rogler homestead, restore it, open it up to the public, and steer it towards a worthy future; our contemporary The Gallery at Pioneer Bluffs is in its main house. He designed and built a great home for his own family between Pioneer Bluffs and Matfield Green; the design is based on old Kansas barns and the living quarters and his studio are—how smart—directly connected to the barn area. Of course his home is a state-of-the-art green design.

Creativity, visual delight, and the unity of man and nature remain core values. His sculptures reflect his naturalist lifestyle. “He has no heavy statement of intent; his artworks are simple totems expressing amazement and joy of existence. They are derived from emotion rather than intellect and from instinct rather than discipline.” Which doesn’t mean he has no intellect—matter of fact, Bill was educated at Harvard Graduate School of Design (proud fact: cowboy town Matfield Green with less than 50 names in the phone book counts two Harvard alumni plus a score of folks well educated at somewhat “lesser” institutions); and he was a Harvard University Sheldon Fellow in Stockholm, Sweden. Folks, you may think we in Matfield Green are out in the boondocks but, *really*, I don’t have to get up early each morning to sweep the coon farts out of the kitchen.

Bill’s sculpture. “Big and small, primal in spirit and primitive in construction,” is what he himself says, which isn’t true—I have seen him create with a sharp eye and a tireless effort to get to a meticulously mastered end product. “It’s just objects connected as simply and directly as possible just as distant ancestors would have,” shrugs Bill. “Using my hands allows me to get to know the objects I am working with.” These objects are both natural and man-made, seemingly discordant bits and pieces he “glues” together thus creating new, unexpected and intensely beautiful forms. He collaborates with his materials rather than manipulating them in the interest of beauty. This September, a big sculpture will be up at The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas; the occasion is its Prairie Festival, an important yearly gathering of leading scientists, progressive philosophers, active environmentalists, and others interested in the well-being of the earth. “Hedge Fire Circle” will not disappear after the festival; it will stand proudly on site for “at least 75 years.”

Being out in nature remains a must for Bill, who can be frequently seen riding his tractor or mower with the same sort of dedication he gives to his art, and his tan cowboy hat sheltering him from the brutality of heat or cold. His dream was “to own a farm.” Eventually, he bought a not-so-big property not fit for serious farming and spread out along the railroad tracks to boot—but then he became Pioneer Bluff’s inspiring “godfather,” which makes up for the lack of his own farm and ranch. “The only disadvantage is that I, of course, invited others to help build, and fully participate in, the dream and now have to battle with opinions that are not always mine. *C’est la vie.*”

Do take a look at Bill’s website: www.billmbridestudio.com.

Ton Haak, July 2012

Photo: “Grid over Prairie” (2010)