

Mylchreest, Melissa "Crazies for You"
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Zemer Peled's "Sky Island" pays tribute to separation, destruction and the beauty of Montana's landscape

Big Timber and easily visible from Interstate 90, the Crazy Mountains almost seem to erupt out of the plains from nowhere, appearing to be all by their lonesome on the landscape. As striking as they are startling, the mountains have historically been utilized by the Crow as a site for vision quests. It's still a wild and remote range that, though difficult to access, is nonetheless prized for its hiking and fishing. But the Crazies also offer artistic inspiration, as evidenced by Zemer Peled's ceramic sculpture, "Sky Island," a highlight of the current Triennial exhibit at the Missoula Art Museum.

"A friend and I were driving from Helena to Billings," Peled says. "She pointed to this huge mountain on the left and said, 'Do you know what that is?' And when I said 'No,' she said, 'It's a sky island.'"

The Israeli artist found herself resonating with the Crazies. The range plays host to isolated communities of high-elevation flora and fauna, effectively cut off from other similar populations by the low-elevation terrain around it. Scattered throughout Montana—think the Little Belts, Big Snowies and Highwoods—these ranges behave, in ecological terms, similarly to islands.

"I was amazed by looking at this huge mountain, which is so lonely, and separated from all the other mountains," Peled says. "Sometimes that's how I feel—separated and different—and I was trying to figure out how to make a piece that would create exactly that feeling."

Born and raised on a kibbutz in Israel, Peled stayed in her home country through college, but left to attend the Royal College of Art in London. She has since been traveling the world, making art and developing a reputation as an innovative sculptural ceramicist. Her work has appeared in Sotheby's and Saatchi Gallery in London, the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv and the Orangerie du Senate in Paris, among others.

But most recently she's found herself in Helena, completing a two-year residency at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts. And that's, of course, how she came face-to-face with an isolated mountain range in Big Sky Country, a far cry from the landscape she grew up in.

"The Montana landscape is very beautiful, but then you also realize how dangerous it can be," she says. "You need to know about many things in nature, like bears, and the weather that can change every minute. The winter for me was a disaster! So it is beautiful, but there is something very hard about living in this place."



- Zemer Peled's "Sky Island," which is on display at MAM's Triennial show, was inspired by Montana's Crazy Mountains.

Fortunately, that juxtaposition between beauty and danger is exactly where Peled finds her inspiration. Her sculptures are simultaneously delicate and fierce, botanical and

natural figures that initially appear soft and even gentle. On closer inspection, however, they reveal their true, slightly sinister nature.

"All my work is made out of porcelain shards that I make myself," Peled says. "The tension that you can find in beauty and destruction—these questions are in my mind all the time. And I'm not sure why, but I feel like that's my vocabulary in my life, that's my aesthetic. I love the contrast between the two feelings."

Peled makes, fires and glazes large slabs of clay, then smashes them to create the building blocks of her sculptures. For "Sky Island," she created crinkled shards that look very much like crumpled paper and finished them all in shades of white, as a nod to the Montana winter landscape.

"This piece really is all about Montana and my time at the Bray, because it really is a special place for me," she says.

As the public comes and goes to view her work, Peled continues to embrace the complicated relationships between permanence and impermanence, as well as the inherent transience of beauty and the ever-present risk of destruction. It's something that exists not only within the world of art, but the natural world as well.

"I heard that people had stepped on some of the shards at the opening," Peled says. "And that someone was standing there watching the piece and saying, 'Do not touch! Don't step on the art!' But I don't care. I'm excited about that!"

Just as Peled has resonated with the Montana landscape, she hopes her audience finds the same sense of wonder with her ceramics.

"I love going to the opening and watching this feeling of discovery when people see what my work is really made out of, or when they're touching it and exploring it," she says. "That's really the best thing for me."

Montana Triennial: 2015 continues at MAM inside the Carnegie Galleries through Sept. 4.