

Aspen Times Weekly: Art as Skiing, Skiing as Art

by Andrew Travers March 10, 2016

When you're a hammer, everything looks like a nail. And when you're a skier, perhaps everything looks like good fall line. Stick around Aspen for any length of time and you'll hear your share of ski metaphors — most of them in the logically flimsy to outright ludicrous range. Life is skiing (cold? fast? all downhill from the start?). Playing the stock market, of course: it's skiing. Politics is like skiing. Marriage, sure, same as skiing.

If you've heard enough of that kind of talk, you would have groaned a bit in late February when Aspen Skiing Co. CEO Mike Kaplan — in a public talk with artist Shinique Smith and Aspen Art Museum CEO Heidi Zuckerman — started waxing philosophical about skiing as abstract art.

But quickly he and Smith, whose [“Resonant Tides” site-specific mural at Elk Camp](#) was the occasion for the event, began vibing and finding some fascinating common ground.

“I bring everything back to skiing,” Kaplan told her, to laughs from the crowd of about 30 that came out to hear the talk at a Snowmass' Ullr Night event at Elk Camp. “In skiing, you can ski the same run over and over and over, but no two runs are ever the same. It almost creates this state — people call it the flow state, being ‘in the zone.’ When creating your work, do you go to another place?”

Smith talked about how her earliest teachers focused on the need to master the basics, specifically drawing a straight line. On that foundation, she said, she built the ability to draw the kind of ecstatic, gestural movements in abstract works like “Resonant Tides.” “My teacher was torturous in making one long single gesture,” she said. From there, she said, she moved to a place where she could create from her gut and lose herself in her energetic blend of collage, paint and line-drawing.

To Kaplan, that sounded a lot like learning French fry-pizza pie before freeskiing a headwall.

“I think that zone comes from a place of deep technical understanding,” he said. “You can then elevate.”

He recalled an early ski instructor who would berate him, yelling “Commit!” if he skied cautiously. And Smith, likewise, said she needs to make an aesthetic commitment to get a piece moving. When she was working on the mural, alone in Elk Camp in the fall offseason, she said she had to get herself out of questioning where she was going with it.

“When I was here, if I wasn't feeling it, I took a break,” she said. “I went outside, I did some stretching, and then I went back to it — to get out of my mind and get back to that place.”

Smith isn't a skier. And Kaplan isn't an artist (though he's made the arts a cornerstone of the company in recent years — even bringing Zuckerman in during the design process of Elk Camp to craft a mural-friendly wall). But their passions, they agreed, bring them to a similar place. Where else might Smith find that freedom of mind?

“I've never felt that in anything else,” she said, “except when I'm dancing by myself, with my eyes closed and no one else is around.”

“Resonant Tides” will be on view in Elk Camp Restaurant on the Snowmass Ski Area through Sept. 4. After that, like a powder day run down Longshot, it'll be nothing more than a good memory.