

CALLING ALL

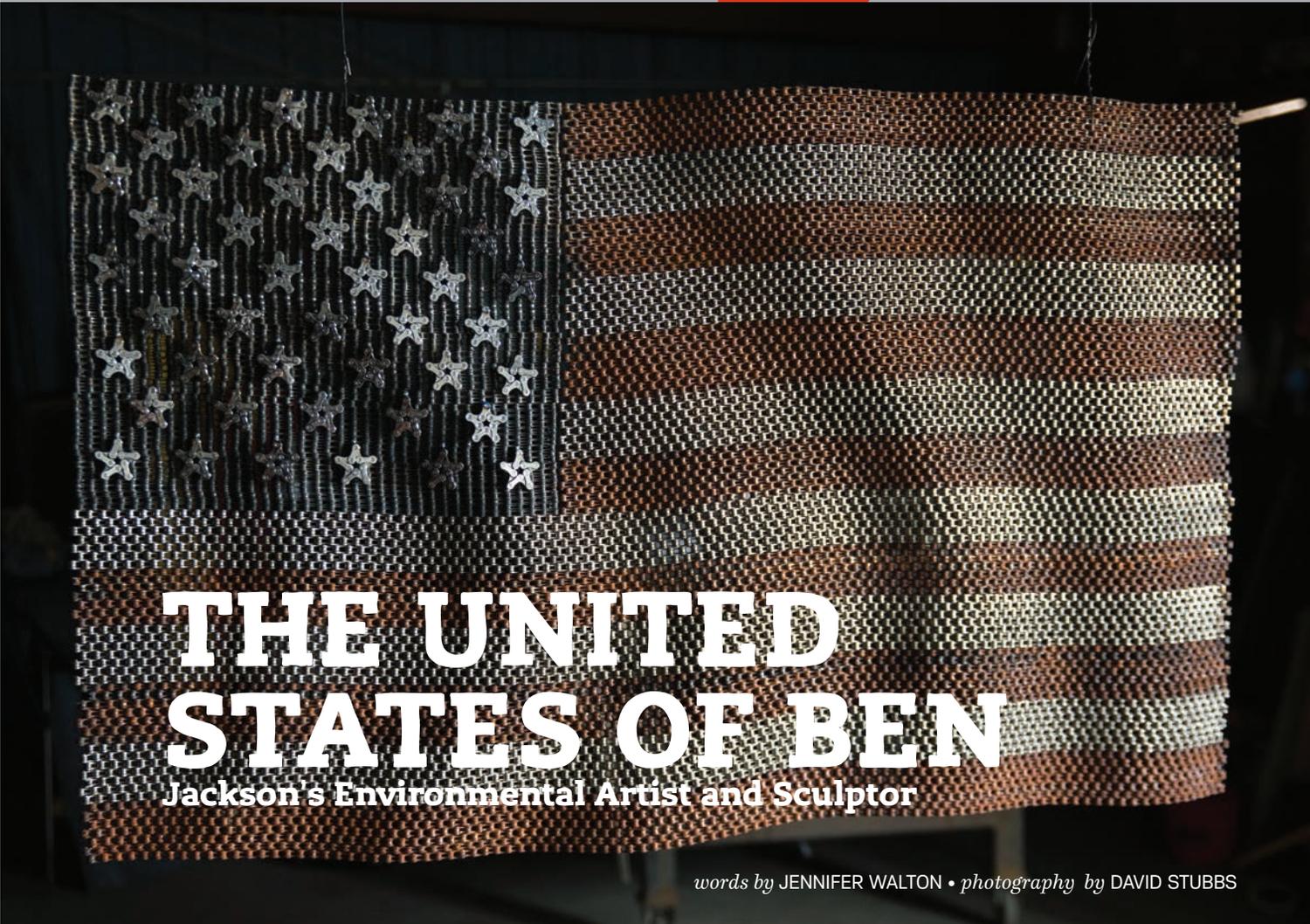
# arts & culture

ADDICTS

Oops. We did it again. We played with your heart and got lost in the game. And there you have it—a Britney Spears allusion at the opening of a celebration of the arts and culture in our mountain towns. But we are unapologetic when it comes to mixing our low culture with our high culture. You have to have the lows to appreciate the flights of fancy, the whirlwinds of whimsy, and elegance of elevated thought and consideration that you

experience when art moves you. And that's just it—our theme for this issue's arts and culture section—art that moves us. From a sculptor in Jackson, Wyoming, to a photographer sometimes based in Sun Valley, Idaho, and an encaustic painter out of Park City, Utah, the artists walking among us currently push us to think deeper and see the world from different angles. We also tip our literary hat to Hemingway, a giant among

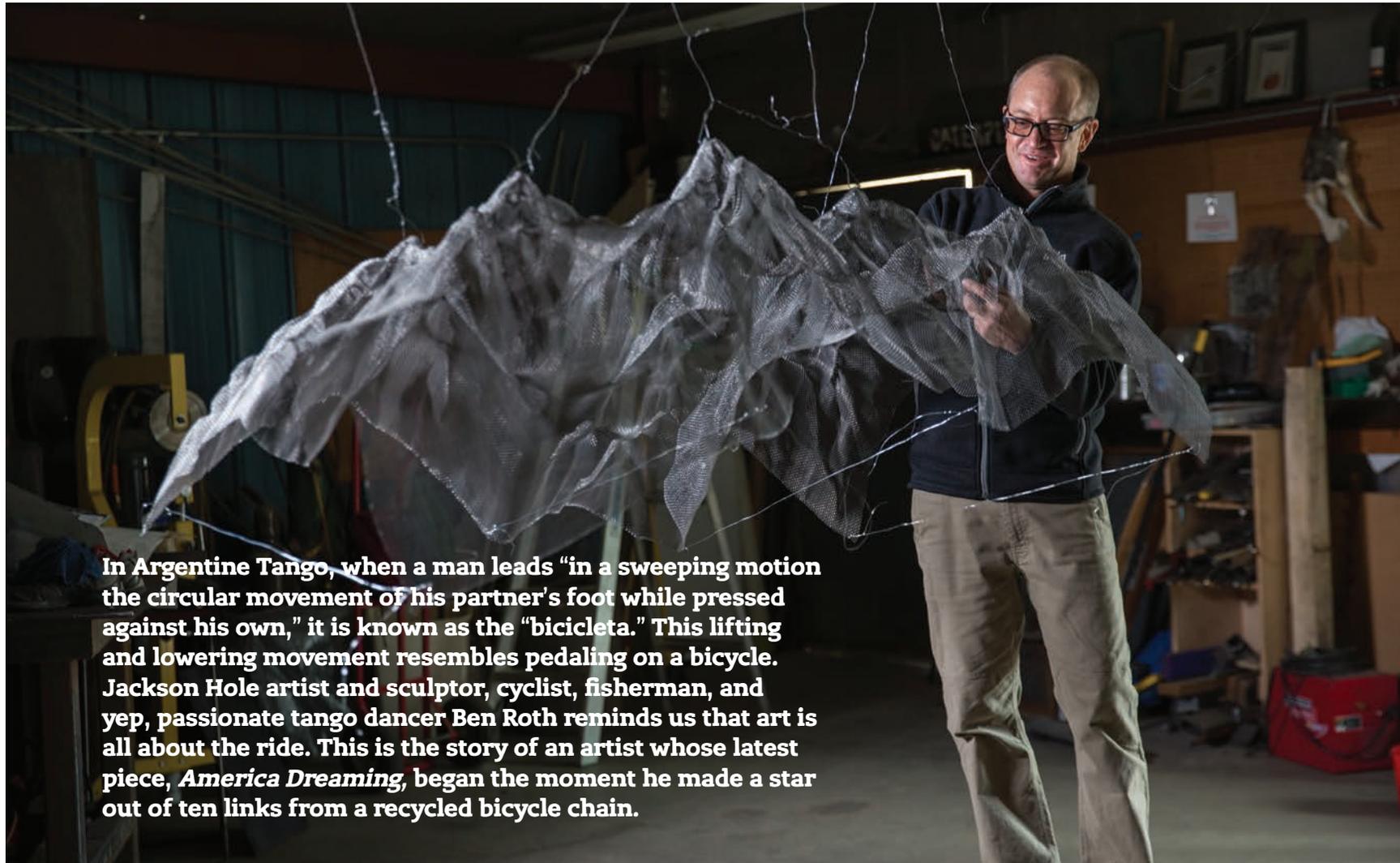
giants who hunted, fished, loved, and wrote in Sun Valley. And finally, we share our musical crush with you—Time for Three, a classically-trained trio shaking things up with Sun Valley Summer Symphony. These are just some of the reasons that life is big out here. So, yes, oops. We did it again. We're bringing you even more reasons to love life here and all the quirky humans living it with you.



## THE UNITED STATES OF BEN

Jackson's Environmental Artist and Sculptor

words by JENNIFER WALTON • photography by DAVID STUBBS



**In Argentine Tango, when a man leads “in a sweeping motion the circular movement of his partner’s foot while pressed against his own,” it is known as the “bicicleta.” This lifting and lowering movement resembles pedaling on a bicycle. Jackson Hole artist and sculptor, cyclist, fisherman, and yep, passionate tango dancer Ben Roth reminds us that art is all about the ride. This is the story of an artist whose latest piece, *America Dreaming*, began the moment he made a star out of ten links from a recycled bicycle chain.**

Ben lives in the moment, on and off his bike, in and out of the studio, in and near the river, and up and down the mountain. Fourteen years of those collective moments led to creating and installing memorable public art for the National Museum of Wildlife Art, The Murie Center, Jackson Hole Public Art, Teton County Recreation Center, and Jackson Hole Mountain Resort. A board member at Teton Artlab, the only year-round residency program within an hour of both Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks that provides studio space and housing to young artists, he shared his studio and assembling wisdom with visiting artists-in-residence,

all while he designed exquisite bespoke sustainable furniture, stairways, gates, and fences, and generated thought-provoking sculpture based on the environment and conservation.

I went to his studio armed with a trio of chilled Zola coconut waters infused with espresso. I was greeted with the sparkly-eyed smile of a young boy who has just been told he is receiving the bike of his dreams for Christmas. He is that generous soul whose infectious energy captivates. Here's what I learned about Ben within minutes—he's polite, intelligent, and blissfully submerged in art, sculpture, community, and the environment.

After a brief but descrip-

tive tour that included a sighting of his well-known animals sculpted from metal screen, a sleek stainless steel Murphy-type bed, a large bell awaiting refurbishing for a friend who will use it as a memorial, and a sumptuous bronze turtle shell, he rolls a round bike chain link globe towards me. I catch it before it falls off his worktable. It feels good in my hands; I want to hold it all day, as a talisman for adventure and good fortune. However, Ben tells me once he makes an opening in the globe, it will become a birdhouse destined for the Community Safety Network, a Jackson non-profit that has commissioned this work.

Devoted to texture and

form, he might use wood, steel, iron, bronze, clay, plaster, porcelain, glass, or fiberglass for his sculptures. His process is one of assembling—objects he has designed, salvaged, and sometimes even built “on the fly.” This process suggests that his work tells more than his own story; his work pieces together the stories of others—stories that reflect the communities he lives in and takes part in. Art like Ben's inevitably starts a conversation—and that's when things get really interesting.

Ben's curiosity and spontaneity have nurtured his connection to the natural world in the Rocky Mountain West and his artwork has tied him to the commu-

ABOVE: Roth working on his *Teton Mountains* sculpture whose home will be in Chicago at the Stio store. OPPOSITE: *America Dreaming*, a sculpture made entirely from recycled bike chains.



making all these memories link in my imagination does not escape me.

While the piece is undeniably poetic and powerful, Ben has broadened my awareness of the environment by exploring the relationship to his locale. Environmental art's (or eco-art's) mission is to improve our relationship to nature. Ben lives a low-impact life, preferring his bike to his van. But, his high-impact art is still what he describes as an "approach to problem-solving." Just watch the Jackson Hole Public Art video titled, "Fallen," and the creation and installation of his white bark pine tree sculpture. Or his *Council of Pronghorn*, exhibited at St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York.

In the case of *America Dreaming*, the flag is symbolic of our independence, but it also evokes the lurking environmental question: can we remember those childhood (and adulthood) days of riding until dark, with only our legs as power, without the need for gas or oil for outdoor recreation? Can and will we continue to address our true nature of freedom and independence sustainably? Ben says, "The first time I do something new, it's scary and thrilling and almost mystical because I don't know what's going to happen. Then I keep experimenting and along comes the confidence." Like that first ride, dance, or piece of art, we can choose where we want to go and what memory we want to take along with us while conserving nature and embracing humanity. With Ben, it's all about nature and art. And, the ride. **BT**



nity. Whether it's his *Teton Mountains* screen sculpture that is heading to Jackson Hole-based Stio's Chicago store or his screen animals, Ben's work reveals a way of approaching the world and our places in it. He takes beings, images, icons, landmarks—ideas that are shared by all of us—and sculpts his interpretation. Here's a *BigLife* tip: buy anything Ben Roth creates. Now.

We were busy chatting when I came across a piece that quieted every-

thing around me. I stood in silence in front of his recent piece. Measuring 48"x30" and weighing in at over 80 pounds, *America Dreaming* is our national flag created from approximately 100 bike chains recycled entirely from bike shops, family, and friends. Remember that "one star" moment? Five hundred links are now 50 stars. Our nation's stripes? Our eyes register the "left out to rust" chains as red, and the shiny (cleaned with N-14, an environmentally-friendly, all-natural degreaser) chains as white. The stars' background is treated to appear blue, again environmentally. Prior to soldering the chains into place, the piece was laid upon a pre-designed mold with ripples. At its completion, the flag simulates movement, a permanent wave representing American's freedom, but also the freedom we get when we ride our bikes, when we create wind power, when we dig deep into our outdoor souls and

minds. I rest my eyes on the details in the links and the subtlety of the color variation, and realize why it packs such a punch. It's because it evokes memories of freedom. It's because I want to be near the memories created from all those rides, and chains, and lives. I wonder where the miles and miles of memories were made, and if the bike's chain rode over a twisted backcountry trail, a busy downtown street, or an ocean-sprayed boardwalk. I imagined rides when one's spirit is chiseled by the unexpected—the sage-filled air, a split-second view of wildlife, a seemingly endless sunset. This accompanying sensation of connection is transformative and I realize Ben the Builder is the also Ben the Transformer. And the metaphor of the chain links

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