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MAM's 35th Annual Fifth Grade Art Experience Adapts to Unique Challenges, Expands Reach, Free of Charge

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The Fifth Grade Art Experience (FGAE) at the Missoula Art Museum entered its 35th season and debuted as a virtual program this month. FGAE was founded in 1985 by the Art Associates of Missoula, a group of dedicated volunteers at the museum. Each year the Fifth Grade Art Experience is offered to schools free of charge and the curriculum is built around three exhibitions at MAM. Each field trip includes a tour of the museum galleries, a related art-making experience, and a visit to the Missoula Public Library. In the past, this program has employed three core teaching artists and 45 trained volunteer docents who serve, on average, 42 fifth grade classes over the course of four months. While the program began as a gift to the students of Missoula County, FGAE has served students in Sanders, Lake, Granite, Mineral, Powell, and Ravalli counties for the past 10 years. The program has served over 50,000 fifth graders since its inception, including students in Tribal and rural schools in surrounding areas.

Given the nature of the pandemic and the current hybrid model of Missoula County Public Schools, FGAE could not be conducted in-person. "Teachers depend on FGAE and look forward to their annual visit to MAM. Canceling the program altogether would have been a tragedy for what many teachers consider their most profound field trip experience of the year. Instead, we quickly developed a virtual version of FGAE, which was endorsed by the new MCPS Arts Education Director without pause," said Kay Grissom-Kiely, MAM curator of education. "The public health crisis has taught MAM that we are reaching audiences in new ways and that the museum is a resource to teachers, parents, and caregivers throughout the state. MAM will bring contemporary art to the community if school groups can't come to us," continued Grissom-Kiely.

FGAE is now available through Museum as Megaphone, a free, interactive, online platform designed in 2019 by MAM and Inspired Classroom, a Missoula-based education tech company. Originally planned as a way give schools outside of western Montana the opportunity to engage with contemporary art, Museum as Megaphone is now the core of educational programming at MAM during the pandemic. Museum as Megaphone launched in early February 2020, with schools participating from as far as the Fork Peck Indian Reservation in eastern Montana.

Museum as Megaphone allows students and teachers from anywhere to virtually tour MAM's galleries. Using the distance learning platform and technological expertise of Inspired Classroom, students log in from their classroom or home and interact directly with exhibiting artists and art educators. Each session includes an interactive exhibition tour, a curriculum for self-guided, hands-on artmaking, and videos and resources for teachers. Courses within the platform focus on contemporary themes from current exhibitions at MAM and meet Montana state standards in English/Language Arts, Visual Arts, Indian Education for All (IEFA), and Social Studies.

MAM uses an innovative approach to help audiences connect with contemporary art — using an interpretive strategy that is inquiry-based, which encourages engagement and builds a culture of self-discovery that has become the foundation of MAM's education programs. Additionally, the museum delivered free sanitized art kits to both online and hybrid/in-person fifth graders within Missoula County. Each kit includes a variety of

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watercolor pencils, watercolor paper, a glue stick, and a paint brush. After students complete the three-hour virtual course, they can participate in live days with the exhibiting artist, Doug Turman, where they video chat with the artist from their classroom. Recently, Museum as Megaphone won a grant from PHILLIPS, an auction house in New York City, and national distinction from the Association of Art Museum Directors, an international organization of art institutions.

Registration for Museum as Megaphone is free and open to all. Visit missoulaartmuseum.org/virtual-programs for more information.

The Fifth Grade Art Experience and Museum as Megaphone are supported by the Art Associates of Missoula, the Jane S. Heman Foundation, PHILLIPS, Missoula County Public Schools, and Inspired Classroom.

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About MAM: Founded in 1975 and accredited by the American Association of Museums since 1987, MAM is emerging as the leading contemporary art museum in the Intermountain West. MAM is situated on the traditional, ancestral territories of the Séliš (Salish or “Flathead”) and Q̓ispé (upper Kalispel or Pend d’Oreille) peoples. MAM is committed to respecting the indigenous stewards of the land it occupies. Their rich cultures are fundamental to artistic life in Montana and to the work of MAM. MAM is a fully accessible, free public museum boasting eight exhibition spaces, a library, and education center in the heart of Missoula’s historic downtown. MAM is open to the public Tuesday through Saturday, 10 AM to 5 PM.

If you would like more information about this topic, please contact Kay Grissom-Kiely, curator of education, at kay@missoulaartmuseum.org.