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THE THREE MUSES OF MAIDEN ROCK

➤ **Road trip alert:** Earl Gutnik discovers a trio of artists worthy of your drive time.

When METRO's collector-in-residence, Earl Gutnik, first told us about his "three muses of Maiden Rock" we were slightly skeptical. Three artists living in Maiden Rock, Wis. OK, so what? But trust Gutnik, with his unerring eye for beauty and his uncanny ability to find a treasure, to steer us right. Indeed, a trip to Maiden Rock, a little over an hour down the Great River Road, is guaranteed to satisfy anyone looking to enjoy a day filled with art, good food and even a touch of mysticism.

"It intrigues me that three established women, who's ages when added together equal a sesquicentennial, should decide one day to sell their homes in the Twin Cities and head down river to Maiden Rock, Wisconsin," Gutnik says. "This is more than just wanting a change. Something is calling these women to Wisconsin bluff country—but what the hell is it?"

According to the three artists—BJ. Christoferson, Cynde Randall and Celeste Nelms—life in Maiden Rock unfolds in a different dimension. "The light, the water, the weather, the bluffs ... it's absolutely amazing here," says Randall, who believes a cosmic vortex hovering over the river below the town is responsible for the otherwise inexplicable pull she felt the first time she visited the tiny town of T26 (or 141, depending on which side of town you enter). Gutnik believes Randall herself is the vortex.

The three women weren't acquainted before they landed in Maiden Rock, but they share sim-





The three muses (from left): B.J. Christofferson, Celeste Nelms and Cynde Randall. BELOW LEFT: Earl Gutnik welcomes us at the wrought iron gates that separate Christofferson's living room/house from the public gallery, Secret Heart.

lar stories. They each had a home they loved in the Twin Cities, and no real desire to pick up stakes. But as each of them visited the river town, they developed strong feelings of attachment and, one by one, bought homes and settled into a slower pace of life—punctuated by the roar of the trains that blast through town dozens of times per day—on the Wisconsin bluffs. Now fast friends, they share their love of art with one another and anyone who cares to stop at Christofferson's and Randall's galleries, which sit side by side on the main street of town, just across from the swoon-worthy Smiling Pelican Bakeshop (the lavender ginger cookies are killer).

Randall opened her gallery, Swan Song Contemporary Arts, last year, and Christofferson followed this past spring with her Secret Heart Gallery, which is really just the front room of her new Maiden Rock home.

Gutnik says he's captivated by the beauty and clarity found in the artwork they produce. "So, does Maiden Rock hold the mystery, or is it these women?" he wonders. "Maybe they have found a perfect combination of place and spirit, and that is why their artwork is so outstanding and expressive."

So take Gutnik's advice and schedule a day to drive down river to see Christofferson's sculpture and assemblage art, Nelms's photography and Randall's paintings and drawings. As he says, "One thing that these women have in common is that they all make art that I want to live with in my home. The work they make provokes me to discover my own talents and how I might go about expressing myself. The question is, do I need to move to Maiden Rock to do so?"

To see examples of each artist's work, go to metromag.com. +



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