

# Humans, nature unite for art

■ Art Association to unveil "From the Ground Up" works at 5 p.m. Thursday.

By Mark Huffman

Karen McCoy made art in Jackson out of dirt, history and willow branches. She's counting on time and the elements to complete the creation.

McCoy's work is art that is Western not because it represents cowboys or mountains, but because it grows from the place and connects people with it.

"It's not just beautiful work, it's about a real deep involvement with the material and the place," McCoy said this week of her two works at Emily's Pond, *Space for Observing Mountains, Hearing Birdsong and Water Trickle* and *Island Gridded for Growth*. Her art is about "different ways of relating to landscape to nurture souls and care for a place."

Emily's Pond is several acres of land donated to Teton County for a park, just off Highway 22 on the east side of the Snake River bridge, a popular exercise area. It's a place that combines nature and manmade things: the river, the mountains in the distance, birds and moose, the big sky and light of Wyoming; and the bridge and the highway, the Snake River dike, a parking lot, the artificial wetland and pond created from an old gravel pit.

McCoy is head of the sculpture department at the Kansas City Art Institute. She is an artist whose work takes elements of nature and arranges them in a way to give visitors to the site a new insight into the place, its history and the part people play in it. She has made earth art around the world.

At Emily's Pond, she has created two connected works she thinks bring people closer to the nature of Jackson Hole but acknowledge the changes made by man. The idea, she said this week, is "to use some language to encourage people to think about their place."

*Island Gridded for Growth* is the small island in the pond, now divided into a grid by woven willow branches.

"The island is a perfectly round little spot of beauty and we gridded every bit of it, just like we humans do," McCoy said. "We took it over, we turned it into geometric space, we fenced it. You can't move across it any more; we claimed it."

The gridwork is a metaphor for how people treat nature, drawing lines that divide things; it has the shape humans impose on nature, the straight-line forms of buildings, streets and agricultural fields. But the grid in this case is a soft one, not a strict border or a wall, but something that McCoy hopes will make its own contribution.

"I hope that within a few years some of the fence will root and grow and begin to provide habitat for animals, and some of it will fall apart," she said.

The other part of McCoy's project is slightly more substantial, but still dedicated to the idea of place, and also something for people to use. To people approaching it from the parking area, *Space for Observing Mountains, Hearing Birdsong and Water Trickle* looks like a pile of dirt, about 10 feet tall. There are several small woven willow terraces on the pile to retard erosion. The revelation comes when people walk around the pile and find



Karen McCoy's woven willow bench offers a nice place for contemplation of the natural world at Emily's Park.

it's actually only half a pile of dirt, that it's been cut away on the opposite side.

The pile is held up by a wall. Round wooden stakes driven into the ground are interlaced with more woven willow to create the wall. At the base of the wall the willows are woven into a bench. As you sit on the bench, the parking lot and highway are behind you, hidden, and even the nearby dike is mostly out of sight. The created corner might just be a quiet place to rest for some visitors. McCoy called *Space for Observing* "a little place where people can sit ... looking at the mountains, looking across a wetlands, looking back across Emily's Pond toward the gridded island."

She also sees it as art in that it interrupts the usual chain of thought and reaction. In visiting the site, McCoy saw the traveled path from parking lot to dike, the many people and dogs out on their habitual route. Nothing wrong in that, she thought, but she wanted to offer something else.

"When I was there everyone pulled up, walked along the dike, they had a predetermined kind of destination, a route and time pattern," she said. "It occurred to me that maybe a little bit of stoppage, an alteration of that, might get people to look around a little more and see what a great place they have.

"Walking is great," she said. "But this is another sort of contemplative activity, looking and listening."