

# Berkey's Bales

MAKING HAY WHILE THE STARS SHINE

by Mo Ellis



**Sue Berkey's Star Bales are an unexpected site in an alfalfa field just north of Fairfield, Iowa. (Photo by Joe Stanski)**

Who knew something as utilitarian and labor intensive as baling hay could be sculpted into fine art? Nothing prepared me for Sue Berkey's Star Bales when I found them installed in a field just north of Fairfield on 185th Street. Nature lights this gentle rolling farm road with cool, delicate shades of pink and gold at sunrise and finishes her display with dramatic gold, reds, and violets at sunset.

Sue Berkey's Star Bales will populate this field throughout the seasons. I see them as an updated version of Monet's haystacks—and imagine them illuminated violet by a winter sunset with their star points softened with a layer of new snow. Right now, the warmer fall sunsets are coloring these sculptures a tawny gold. I may not be the only photographer in Southeast Iowa considering how to capture their unique profiles at different times of day as the subtleties of the light and seasons play over them. Sue describes her inspiration for the Star Bale project “as an idea I had in

my head for years that just never went away. So when I finished renovating the house”—a hands-on project for Sue—“I knew it was time to make the Star Bales.”

Sue grew up in Philadelphia, where her parents cultured creativity and surrounded her with art in her home, as mine did, too. Both of our mothers were painters. And oddly enough both of our fathers were what she fondly described as Renaissance men—mechanically adept in their fields; not only able to do anything, but also to do it well! Sue is quite a Renaissance woman herself.

After undergraduate work and a term at the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program, Sue finished her MFA at Kent State University in Ohio, in sculpture. She was a full-time artist for the next nine years. With art as her priority, she worked as a waitress and taught art and wood shop at a private school. As a self-described “wild creature,” Sue found it hard to adapt to confinement or schedules. The loss of free time “just about killed me,” she said.

In showing her sculptures and films internationally, Sue gathered awards for “research and investigation in new forms of cinematography” in Venezuela, and won prizes at the Ann Arbor, Michigan, Film Festival, and the Athens, Ohio, Film Festival. She spent time as an artist-in-residence at Scattergood Friends School in West Branch, Iowa, installed a one-person outdoor sculpture show at the Missouri Botanical Gardens in St. Louis, and received a major commission in the city of San Francisco to produce an installation sculpture. Sue credits the Star Bales project as “a significant reconnection with my artist self. This is the first major piece I’ve done in many years,” she says, adding, “Making serious art will never again be on the back burner in my life. I’m back!”

Currently, aside from her career in art, Sue is also a well-known yoga instructor, Rebirther, house remodeler, and mother to her son Luke, who is now 20 and emerging as a filmmaking talent in his own right.

When I first heard about the Star Bales project, I envisioned it in my own mind, but I wasn’t prepared for the scale in which she chose to work. I imagined stars that were perhaps the same diameter as the ends of the big round bales I had grown fond of seeing in Iowan rural fields, but I was amazed when I got up close and realized her Star Bales are the same in every dimension as the round bales a hay baler spits out.

For the urban refugees who’ve moved to our pastoral flyover state from

either coast, here is a primer on the work and equipment required in baling hay, to help you appreciate the effort that Sue undertook. The most frequently used type of baler is a round baler that produces cylindrically shaped bales. The hay is simply rolled up inside the baler using a combination of rollers and belts. When the bale reaches a determined size, twine or mesh wrap binds it together. The back of the baler opens and the bale drops out. Bales range from four to six feet in diameter and up to five feet wide. Round bales can weigh a ton or more, which means they require special moving equipment.

Sue's Star Bale construction was entirely hand constructed. First, she found Ted Tedrow, a farmer who specializes in straw bales. An amazing "can-do" guy with a great attitude, Ted liked Sue's project. He delivered a round straw bale of timothy grass, reed canary grass, and bird's-foot trefoil to Sue's backyard in Fairfield. Then she began to experiment with techniques for the construction of a Star Bale. "I would lie in bed at night running through engineering possibilities in my head, which was fun for me," Sue says. "And after a few bloopers, the final plan came into focus."



**The Star Bales are beautifully lit at sunrise. (Photo by Joe Stanski)**

Each Star Bale has 12 parts—a front and back star panel, and 10 star-point facet panels (two for each point). So if you do the math, for each of the 3 Star Bales she installed, Sue made 30 star-point facet panels and 6 big star

panels. Each part is cut out of CDX plywood (made with glue that can withstand wet conditions without de-laminating) and covered with 2 to 3 inches of pressed straw, tightly tied with twine, and securely wrapped with plastic “net wrapping,” which is the same wrap you see on round bales. Then all the parts were screwed onto a wooden 2-by-4 internal frame. And yes, like round bales, these are heavy.

It took four men to just barely pick one up after Sue had built them on specially made pallets, and using a skid loader, they transported them to the field. The entire production cycle took two months altogether, with Sue learning “that slow and steady will get me where I want to go.” n

**Directions:** Finding the Star Bales is easy: take Highway 1 north from Fairfield and turn left on 185th Street. You’ll find the field 0.2 miles along that road as you head west. Approaching from the north on Highway 1, turn right on 185th Street, the first road after Airport Road.

*Sue really wants to give a shout out to Brian Stains, Jeff Town, Tim Tedrow, Joe Stanski, Peter DeRuider, Kim Strubell, Jim Busscher, Michaela Terrien, Ian Fry, Louise and Jonathan Lynch, and Luke Stenger. And mostly importantly to her backyard neighbors for enduring the sound of an electric stapler for weeks on end, with a special thanks going to the Global Country of World Peace, which owns the field the Star Bales sit on.*

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