



48 Court St.
Skowhegan, ME 04976
207-612-2571
info@mainstreetskowhegan.org
mainstreetskowhegan.org

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First artist selected for Kennebec on Fire public art project

SKOWHEGAN—Norridgewock artist Steve Anderson has been selected to craft the first sculpture for Kennebec on Fire, a public art project coordinated by nonprofits Main Street Skowhegan and the Wesserunsett Arts Council (WesArts). The sculpture will be installed this summer in the Kennebec River in Skowhegan and will remain there seasonally every year.

Anderson's design repurposes an old quarter-inch-steel propane tank. Anderson included salmon silhouettes and cut-outs in his design to pay tribute to Skowhegan, which means "a place to watch [for fish]." The sculpture will hold firewood for a bonfire that will light up the Kennebec in downtown Skowhegan. After several fires are lit, the sculpture will develop "a really nice rust patina," Anderson says.

Anderson has worked with metal found objects for more than 15 years. "My work is strong, primitive, and often industrial with a folk art element," he says. "One of the reasons my work has a primitive feel to it is because I am almost completely self-taught in the use of my various tools and processes. It is part of who I am as an artist."

"Mr. Anderson's use of spawning salmon imagery is very much in keeping with the spirit of this river-sited installation," said Smithfield artist Kevin James, a member of the Kennebec on Fire jury. "Although his was not the only design to incorporate this icon, the fact that he presents his 'salmon' as both silhouettes and illuminations through his employment of negative and positive spaces set his work apart." James added: "There is something very Maine in Anderson's piece. It has a rustic, rough-around-the-edges character. The maker's marks are there for all to see. We know the tool that cut the steel was guided by the artist's eye, not a computer, and that it was wielded by the artist's hands."

Anderson's work will be the first of an installation that will ultimately include up to five sculptures, to be completed over the next year and a half. The project is funded by grants from the Maine Arts Commission and the Maine Community Foundation as well as private donations.

The sculptures, inspired by WaterFire in Providence, R.I., will each include a fire brazier that can be filled with wood and lit during festivals and other events. Mounted to floating bases built by Skowhegan business Maine Wood Heat, the sculptures will be installed in the Great Eddy, just below the gorge, in Skowhegan and be visible from Coburn Park and Route 2 on the north side and from the Philbrick Trails on the south side.

Anderson's sculpture will be used as a prototype, with plans to install it in the river in July before commissioning other sculptures.



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"This is an important collaborative effort between Wesserunsett Arts Council and Main Street Skowhegan to bring focus to the natural beauty of the Kennebec River by displaying a beautiful sculpture created by a local artist," said Peggy Hamilton, president of the Wesserunsett Arts Council Board of Directors.

Kennebec on Fire is designed to use public art as a catalyst to foster a sense of place and stimulate tourism.

The project is derived from the Somerset County Rural Cultural Plan, which was led by WesArts and Main Street Skowhegan and completed in 2018. Ninety-five percent of respondents to the cultural plan's Public Opinion Survey said they are interested in experiencing the arts in nature, and 94 percent said growing tourism by promoting the region's assets is important.

About Main Street Skowhegan

Main Street Skowhegan's mission is to celebrate Skowhegan's rich heritage while achieving our brightest future as a thriving economic, cultural, and recreational community where residents enjoy a high quality of life.

About the Wesserunsett Arts Council

WesArts' mission is to cultivate creativity and harness cultural strength to share the story of Somerset County, Maine. WesArts envisions a region where residents, businesses, and government value, support, and fully integrate the arts—in all their diversity—into the fabric of civic life.

For additional information, please contact Kristina Cannon, Executive Director of Main Street Skowhegan at kristina@mainstreetskowhegan.org.