

Meet the artists (and the egrets) coming to the Back Cove this summer

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“Dancing for Joy (By the Will of the People),” shown in a rendering, will be installed in June. *Image by The Myth Makers.*

Donna Dodson and Andy Moerlein met at an art gallery. She has long been interested in carving figures out of wood. He makes art out of natural materials. Her work was on display inside the gallery, and his was outside. It was a rainy day, so he ventured indoors. Now, they are married and collaborate on public art projects as The Myth Makers. They have completed over 50 projects together in the United States, Switzerland, Vietnam and Taiwan.

Public events

Community opening, June 13, 5 to 6 p.m.

See “Dancing with Joy” for the first time, meet the artists, and enjoy performances by the Maine Academy of Music. The rain date is June 14.

“Discovering Creativity of Building with Bamboo,” June 15, 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.

The Myth Makers will present a hands-on workshop on the bamboo techniques they use to build their monumental sculptures. This event is free and open to the public; registration is required by emailing manager@tempoartmaine.org.

For more information, visit tempoartmaine.org.

This year, TempoArt selected The Myth Makers to build a sculpture at the Back Cove Trail and Park. The nonprofit formed in 2015 and funds art installations in public spaces around Portland. The pieces remain in place for one or two years, and then are returned to the artists, who can move them to a new home. Previous projects include “Carousel Cosmos” by Chris Miller on the Western Promenade and Pamela Moulton’s “Beneath the Forest, Beneath the Sea” in Payson Park.

The Massachusetts-based artists will install “Dancing for Joy (By the Will of the People)” in June, and it will remain for up to two years. They answered five questions about their art and the piece they will build in Portland.



Donna Dodson and Andy Moerlein are The Myth Makers. *Photo by Paul Weiner and courtesy of The Myth Makers.*

You describe your practice as a “mash up” of interests or styles. So how do you strike that balance? How do your individual talents or interests come together to make the work that the Myth Makers make?

Moerlein: Relationships are not easy, and collaborations are not easy. They both take a whole lot of work. We both really find that we work at it. There’s difficult times when we both have an idea or an opinion that has to go into the piece. We’ve actually submitted two completely different ways of approaching a design and then took whichever one the client or the partner decided they really wanted us to pursue. It just seems to always work out. I think that slight edge of challenge and discomfort and working with somebody else’s ideas are what make us really learn from each other and produce better work.

How did you conceptualize this piece?

Moerlein: We always start every piece that we do with site visits. It’s really important for us to be connected to the site and make sure that whatever we decide to build is connected to the site. So we drove up on a beautiful day and hiked around the trail. It was in the fall, and it was really exciting to see the great egrets were in such abundance. It was kind of odd. We hadn’t seen that in a while, that many of them. We must have counted 10 or 15 of them. Of course, it was in the fall, and it must have been all the babies were out. But it was just

delightful. We saw them and were just very intrigued. And we looked at the site, and it's well located. The beauty of doing the great egrets is they're white. They'll be very visible against all sorts of surfaces, but they'll also have that ephemeral, translucent quality that our sculptures have.

And we always try to attach an avatar, a person that somehow represents the extravagance of the bird or the unique qualities. ... With the great egrets, it came to mind the couple that was the first couple to be married under the same sex law. What was really interesting about that was that law was enacted by the will of the people. The people refused to let it get smothered in the Legislature. ... So they put it on a citizens petition, and it was put on the ballot.

The idea basically is a blending of the joyful dance of the great egret and the joyful response that society has when people are allowed to marry who they love.

Dodson: It's a Portland, Maine, story. Public art, it often has a purpose. It's not just decorative. The work we do allows us to often draw upon local stories and tell them or retell them or bring them to light in new ways, and that's really important.

Can you describe what it will look like?

Dodson: We often build these monumental, birdlike bamboo structures. When we work at the scale that we do – we're proposing a 20-foot scale – it means that adults can walk between them and feel very childlike and full of wonder.

One of the ways that we'll anchor it is that we'll add dramatic wing shapes. Part of their mating dance is that they flap their wings and their tails and throw their heads back. So the addition of the wings and tails will happen on site. Some of those will even be designed with doors that are clearly only made for children, so that interactive quality and nature of the sculpture will really come to life on site. It's really important to us the way it engages adults and viewers of all ages.

One of the exciting things about these temporary installations has been that they have really activated spaces, inspired both planned and unplanned engagement with the pieces for the life of the sculpture in the community. How do you hope people respond or plan their own experiences or art around the egrets?

Moerlein: Our pieces are built out of a very ephemeral nature. There's a sense that you're inside a space even though you can see through it and out of it. I think that enclosed space is very inviting to people. It's not intimidating like a solid box would be. It has a freeing sense, and yet it also has a sense of enclosure that's not real. We think that will definitely invite people to play with it.

Your work is typically temporary in nature. and that's a key factor in the TempoArt projects. Why does that interest you?

Dodson: Really, it's our commitment to the environment and really low carbon footprint. We're just two artists collaborating. We're not a whole fortress of people. We like working with natural materials. Bamboo is an extremely sustainable material to work with.

It can be extraordinarily difficult to put up public art because it has to go through so many committees and design and engineering reviews, and really the beauty of temporary is that it's not going to stay forever. Oftentimes, you can be a little bit riskier. You can do something more innovative or bold because, hey, it's going to come down. We like that fugitive, you know, nature of temporary. Even though, really, the memory of our work will outlast it, and we like that, too. It's a focus on experience versus objects.



The Myth Makers built "The Dance of the Sandhill Crane" in Wausau, Wisconsin, in 2016. *Image by Andrew McGivern/The Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum.*

