

# How the 'Boat of Eternal Return' made its way to a Portland gallery

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By Eric Russell

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Canadian artist Stephanie Rayner holds a cello head that goes on the back of the 30-foot boat made from animal bones, cello parts and other media that she was setting up at Cove Street Arts in Portland. In the box is the prow of the boat. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

The artist Stephanie Rayner, who moved to Maine from Canada over five years ago, had visited Cove Street Arts in Portland's East Bayside neighborhood many times before she got the courage to ask.

## IF YOU GO

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**WHAT:** "Boat of Eternal Return," an installation by artist Stephanie Rayner, originally from Canada but now living in Maine.

**WHERE:** Cove Street Arts, 71 Cove St., Portland; [covestreetarts.com](http://covestreetarts.com)

**WHEN:** The gallery is open from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays. The piece was installed on Oct. 27 and will be exhibited through the end of the year.

**WHAT ELSE:** The artist will participate in a talk with Aaron Rosen, author of "Art & Religion in the 20th Century" and director of the Parsonage Gallery in Searsport, at 7 p.m. Nov. 17 at the gallery.

“They consistently had fabulous shows that were so well curated, and out of nowhere I said, ‘Would you ever consider showing something that could never be sold?’” Rayner recalled.

The response from Cove Street co-director Kelley Lehr surprised her.

“She said, ‘Try me.’”

That’s how Rayner’s massive, mystical installation piece, titled “Boat of Eternal Return,” ended up as an exhibit at the large commercial gallery space. It opened last week and will be on view through Dec. 31.

“I instantly felt connected to it,” Lehr said. “It’s a thrill to be able to offer it.”

But the story of how the sculpture came together, and Rayner’s own journey as an artist, goes back much further.

She grew up mostly in the woods of Canada, north of Toronto. On her father’s side of the family was a long line of artists, including her father, who was an illustrator. But Rayner didn’t join them immediately.

In fact, her father once told her, “art was too difficult for women.”

“He wasn’t cruel about it or anything, that was just his reality,” she said.

So, Rayner focused on other things. When she was old enough, she started to travel. To South America, parts of Africa, Iran and Afghanistan.

“I spent a lot of time in places where people had never seen blond hair and blue eyes,” she said. “I came back from a really long trip, and I had never thought about doing art, but I had turned 30, and it was like a caterpillar turning into a chrysalis. I was totally committed to art, and it came from within.”

There is a strong spiritual thread in Rayner’s work, and even though she is self-taught, she has lectured on the connection between science and spirituality in artwork.

Rayner already had done larger pieces for museums in Canada when the idea for the “Boat of Eternal Return” came to her. But the piece took her 14 years to complete.

“I felt like this piece has only one chance at life, and I have to give it that,” she explained.

She wanted to create something that signified a journey, not just a physical journey but a spiritual one, passing between the living world and the dead. She wanted to use raw, natural materials, including 13 sets of moose ribs that run the length of the 30-foot sculpture.

To find them, she had to visit a pit of animal carcasses in Algonquin Provincial Park, north of Toronto. The stench was so heavy, she nearly gave up.

She found other materials, too – the pelvic bone of a female horse, parts from stringed instruments, even a type of gel used in DNA mapping. Underneath the gel, encased in wood and surrounded by the moose bones, is sheet music for Mozart's Requiem.

It was first exhibited at the Peel Museum of Art + Archive in Brampton, a suburb of Toronto, in the fall and winter of 2015. The exhibit generated enough buzz that the Dalai Lama's top nun and two other Buddhist nuns flew to Canada to bless the boat as a sacred object.

Shortly after the exhibit was over, Rayner moved to Maine. She had been coming here since attending a workshop on Star Island south of Kittery. She met a man there. They danced and fell in love.

He proposed but she told him that she “wasn't a good bet.”

But she continued coming back to Maine periodically to visit while she was making art, including the boat. When it was finished, she accepted his proposal.

She ended up teaching at the Maine College of Art and Design, and during a show there, she had printed a large photograph of the “Boat of Eternal Return.” Someone saw it and asked if she made it. Rayner said, yes. The next question was: Well, why isn't it here?



Paul Howard, a builder from Toronto, Jim Vander Schaaf, a furniture builder and ship captain from South Portland and Canadian artist Stephanie Rayner look over the prow of the boat as they began to set up the exhibit at Cove Street Arts. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

Rayner never imagined bringing her installation to Maine. She figured it would be too expensive to transport. But a South Portland boat captain, James Vander Schaaf, who also is a furniture builder and artisan, told her if she could get it to water in Canada, he'd do the rest.

That's when Rayner started thinking about where it might go. Cove Street was her first choice.

Rayner talked with Lehr about the piece and showed her the photograph. Lehr was moved and said she'd be happy to set aside some gallery space for it.

"I had full-body goosebumps and started to tear up when I saw it," Lehr said. "It's a museum-caliber piece, and I think our patrons are going to be astounded."

Rayner, in turn, was moved that a gallery would commit a large portion of its space for two months to something it can't even sell.

The generosity of Cove Street, she said, is another reason to love Maine. She said she has responded to living here because of the state's wild beauty, which reminds her of Canada.

And she's still creating.

"Real works of art come from what I call the river, the world's soul," she said. "I want to make every piece so that the simplest soul could look and find peace in it."

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