



- [HOME](#)
- [NEWS](#)
- [SPORTS](#)
- [OP/ED](#)
- [ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Contact Us](#)

Campus' caged heron; many interpretations finally silenced

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Guest Op/Ed Columnist

For the last five months, an enormous caged heron has stood in the courtyard of Winona State University, watching passersby through sightless red eyes. Its presence has led to debate and disagreement among students over the meaning of the piece.

The 7-foot-tall sculpture is one of 15 herons decorated by local artists for the Blue Heron Project, a citywide art event in Winona aimed at raising money for the Winona Fine Arts Commission.

Twenty-six-year-old Matt Semke, an alumnus of Winona State, is the artist behind the heron that stands on campus.

His creation, titled "Artists Selected Will be Required to Sign a Contract," is noticeably different from other herons installed throughout the city. Its stark white appearance sets it apart from its counterparts, which are painted in brilliant colors and often intricately detailed.

The design of his heron, Semke said, began as a stab at the contest itself. Many of the rules for artists interested in contributing to the event struck him as inartistic, he said, and the design he submitted for the caged heron was his form of protest.

"We were told the art couldn't be political or derogatory in any way, which is kind of a weird rule... I think all art is a little bit political. I don't think there's any escaping that," Semke said.

He was also bothered by the fact that artists with sponsors were more likely to have their designs accepted.

"It was like, if you have money, you get to play," he said. "I'm always happy to see them trying to get money for the artists in the community, but to sell art short was a screwy way to approach it."

He took the title of his piece directly from the rule list, he said. The caged bird

represents the lack of freedom for the artist.

Anne Scott Plummer, Winona State University art department professor and Watkins Gallery director, said the wide variety of interpretations for Semke's piece is the mark of powerful art.

"I think it's really successful that way," Plummer said. "As opposed to just a bird with a landscape of Winona on it. Those are nice, but you know, there's only one way to read it. Whereas, Matt's piece, if you talk to ten people, you'll get ten different interpretations. That makes it very rich."

Plummer, who is a sculptor and ceramic artist, painted a heron titled "Spring DanceRite," which stood in front of the headquarters for RiverStar, Inc. Her piece is decorated with nude figures, a theme that has manifested itself in much of her work.

Plummer heard about the project from Bernadette Mahfood and Lynette Power, two local artists, who, she said, "hatched" the idea for the citywide art project.

Power, a Winona sculptor, lives in a large Victorian house on Eighth Street brimming with artwork. A heron stands on the sweeping front porch, and inside, the walls are covered with intricately detailed figures cast in bronze. Her specialty is body forms—elegant Grecian busts and nude figures grace the rooms, and a large workroom in the rear of the house is full of sculptures in various stages of completion.

She chose to sculpt a heron, she said, both because they represent the city of Winona and because their shape lent itself to her existing work.

"Blue herons have beautiful, lyrical lines," she said. "They have a beautiful form, they're so poetic."

She declined to pick a favorite among the herons. "They're all fabulous," she said. "And there are such good stories behind all of them."

Natalie Siderius, who served as the director for the project, said the Blue Heron Project has been a success for the Winona community.

"I think people have really enjoyed them," she said. "I'm pleased with the way it turned out."

Her hope, she said, is for community longevity. Siderius hopes the Blue Heron Project will encourage the growth of the arts in the Winona area, tying into existing artistic events like the Frozen River Film Festival and Shakespeare on the River.

The auction of the herons will be held at the Tandeski Center at the Southeast Minnesota Technical College on Saturday, October 13, at 7:00 p.m. Tickets are \$10 in advance and \$12 at the door.

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