

Portland Press Herald

A concrete idea: Sculptor arranges 5,000 blocks by hand at Thompson's Point

Portland artist Aaron Stephan has been making concrete blocks for years, and for about a week, he's realized an idea he had for them.



Fellow artists Pamela Moulton of North Bridgton and Roy Fox of Portland take in an installation at Thompson's Point with over 5,000 concrete blocks of different sizes Monday. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

The tiniest blocks are less than an inch long, smaller than a domino or a miniature toy car. The largest are 22 inches long, surpassing the size of a standard concrete block from a hardware store.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Block Field,” a temporary installation by Aaron Stephan

WHERE: 28 Resurgam Place, Thompson’s Point, Portland

WHEN: By appointment through Friday

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And there are 5,000 of them.

Portland artist Aaron Stephan made them all by hand for a temporary installation in Portland: a field of concrete blocks in a vacant distillery in Thompson’s Point in Portland. The largest ones are on the outside, and they get progressively smaller toward the center. The effect is a little like a black hole, sucking you into its center. The piece carries a huge amount of weight, literally and figuratively, and Stephan hopes it will find a home in a museum (one that can handle an estimated 20,000 pounds and has 1,200-plus square feet to spare).

Even that means he will have to assemble it again, which was, he admitted, “kind of miserable.”

“Pools of sweat on the floor,” he said. “And tears and blood.”

Stephan said this idea came in part from his own questions about public monuments and how they shape our understanding of history. (Another ongoing project is based on statues of Christopher Columbus.) He thought about a structure that has collapsed – perhaps into 5,000 concrete blocks on the floor – and how its destruction could make something better.

“I think this reckoning with public monuments reflects a deeper change in the U.S. in which we are coming to terms with how deeply enmeshed inequality is, in the very structure of our politics, institutions and culture,” he said. “In a way, this artwork reflects some of the dismantling and restructuring that is taking place in response to these issues – showing a collapse of existing structures and pointing to a new energy that could rise out of this. In this way, it speaks to a collapse, or dismantling, but also a restructuring and hope.”



Stephan is showing “Block Field” by appointment through Friday. On Saturday, he’ll take it down.
Derek Davis/Staff Photographer

In Portland, Stephan is probably best known for “[Luminous Arbor](#),” the twisted light fixture at Woodfords Corner. But he has installed large-scale work across the country. Recent projects include “Paths Rising” for the Tampa International Airport, where more than 600 tapered handmade ladders hang from a dome painted in golf leaf, and “Woven Lines,” a swirling sculpture made from guardrails in a roundabout near Des Moines.

Stephan often makes tiny models of his huge sculptures, and that process got him thinking about smaller things that represent bigger things. He got curious about concrete blocks around 2016. When he started researching how concrete blocks are made, he found an ad in a Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalogue at the turn of the century for a machine that did so. Around the same time, the mail-order catalogue was selling kit houses, and the concrete block machine was one tool to help the DIY homebuilder. When Stephan couldn’t find one of these handy machines, he made his own.



Stephan used molds pictured here to make the blocks. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

With the machine and molds, he and his studio assistants started making concrete blocks in all sizes. He made a life-size façade of a kit house. He made a tiny model of a full kit house. He made blocks and painted them pink. He made blocks that look exactly like the ones you can buy for a building project and blocks that were twisted into unfamiliar shapes. He made a swirling tower of curved blocks that stood 10 feet tall.

Stephan had been working on this particular idea for four or five years, but he did not have a space big enough to really try it. But one day, he got a sign that it was worth doing. “I have this UPS guy that, I swear, I’ll be hanging upside down from the ceiling, like, painting something. And he’ll just walk in and drop off the box. Nothing phases him. Then one day, I had it set up in this configuration, and I caught him –” Stephan mimicked the shocked look on the man’s face that day. “I was like, ‘Yes, I got him.’ ”

Stephan had just gotten back from a month and a half at a residency in Italy when he heard from Chris Thompson, developer of Thompson’s Point. Stephan had used space there before to prep large projects (he worked on the twisting guardrail on an empty lot there last year), and Thompson told him that the space formerly occupied by Stroudwater Distillery would be empty for about three weeks if he wanted it. So Stephan rented a box truck and started loading up years’ worth of concrete blocks that had been stacked behind his studio at Cassidy Point in Portland. He joked that it was his “post-Italy workout.”

“It was just like pasta and meat, like three courses for every meal,” he said. “I feel like this is also penance for that.”

It took him two days to move the blocks and two days to get them in place. The heaviest ones are about 70 pounds. Because the project came together so quickly, he had to do most of the labor himself. He marked concentric circles on the floor to achieve the size gradient. And then he just started in the middle and worked his way out for a square with sides of about 35 feet.

He hosted a reception last weekend for roughly 200 people and had a steady stream of appointments over the last week. Stephan said he has enjoyed showing this work in his own community, a rarity when many projects take him out of the state. He advised against trying to climb on the blocks (his wife, artist Lauren Fensterstock, did but found them to be a little unstable). Museum representatives have come to see it. One visitor compared it to a ball pit (“but like, really dangerous,” Stephan said). Another arrived in steel-toe boots just in case.



Portland sculptor Aaron Stephan has just finished a giant installation at Thompson's Point with over 5,000 concrete blocks of different sizes. He spent years on the project and made all the blocks himself. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

Last week, Bridgton artist Pamela Moulton was one of those who stopped in to circle the block field. She said Stephan advised her on public art projects of her own when she was starting to work in that area.

“Amazing,” she said to Stephan. “From different positions, you read it so differently.”

Moulton said later that she admires the way Stephan is always trying new mediums in his work and how he created a sense of movement in this piece with such heavy objects.

“Is the world deconstructing? Is the world reconstructing?” said Moulton. “I wasn’t sure what I was looking at, but I liked it.”

The overall response, Stephan said, has been gratifying.

“Especially with a big piece like this, I’m always afraid that people will come in for two seconds and walk away,” he said. “It definitely has been pulling people in, and they’re spending time with it and discovering it.”

But it all needs to come down again on Saturday. Stephan said he won’t be sad in an artistic sense to disassemble the block field. Much of his work is permanent public art, but he might leave a job site and never see the piece in person again. So the temporary nature of this installation doesn’t bother him, but he’s already aching in a physical sense. At least he was able to arrange for a couple helpers this time.

“And if anybody wants to participate ...,” he said jokingly – or maybe not.