



*Sawyer stands triumphantly atop  
a work-in-progress made from the girders  
of a dismantled building.*

# Beauty & Wonder

## Jay Sawyer Sparks Sculpture from Salvaged Materials

JAY SAWYER IS WELDING. Sparks fly in the small barn attached to his cedar-shingled, circa-1820 farmhouse in Warren. Iron rods and steel horseshoes are strewn across the cement floor. A bright sticker on a nearby metal cabinet reads “Artists are here to disturb the peace.”

In this barn, located down a narrow dead-end road that was once the meandering path of old Route 1, Jay Sawyer is welding himself a new and inspired life he calls Stemwinder Sculpture Works & Gardens.

With a knit skullcap pulled tight on his head and his bushy salt-and-pepper beard jutting out over his shirt collar, Sawyer walks the dirt road behind his barn and surveys his land. The broad-shouldered 50-year-old makes a sweeping motion with his arm across the pie-shaped property. “This lot was filled up with pasture pine when we bought it in the early 1980s, but I’ve been thinning it,” says Sawyer, who, like many Mainers, talks with affection about his property. “I’ve got a little seven-and-a-half acre wedge here,” he says, smiling brightly. “It’s high land—no one draining on me anywhere.”

Beyond the thinned woods at the backside of Sawyer’s land, the property boasts Route 90 frontage. On the edge of that busy thoroughfare, Sawyer has placed a mid-1950s Ford pickup that



*Sprocket Sphere: An early Sawyer sculpture crafted from the worn sprockets of a mussel-washer.*

he’s painted crudely with stars and stripes. In summer months, the truck is a beacon that draws hundreds of people up the dirt road to visit Sawyer’s sculpture garden, where dozens of his metal sculptures ring a small, reed-rimmed farm pond dug in the 1950s.

At every turn, there are large spheres formed from old horseshoes intricately welded together, some of which are hanging from the trees. Still more spheres have been shaped out of curved steel rods. There are sculptures fashioned out of old sprockets

and gears, and strips of steel flat-iron bar. Many of the sculptures combine rusty metals with large pieces of cut granite or natural fieldstones fringed with moss.

Sawyer’s art is made entirely of salvaged materials and much of the work feels at once familiar but unfamiliar, inviting and disquieting. Some art can never be plucked from the white confines of a museum or gallery and thrive outdoors in juxtaposition with nature—but Sawyer’s can. His sculptures, in their surge toward the organic, seem to insist upon presentation in the cluttered cacophonous beauty of the real world.

“An appreciation for natural beauty and appreciation for not throwing anything out have merged pretty good right here,”



*Sawyer rolls out “Endless Trot,” one of his many horseshoe spheres.*

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jokes Sawyer, whose eyes brighten noticeably when he’s excited. “Some have said my property may be my best sculpture to date. And I can see that more and more now,” he continues after a pause.

One of humanity’s great failings is that we often overlook that which is right in front of us. Turning his land into his art was not something Sawyer really set out to do, just as he never set out to turn his welding into artistry. But Sawyer’s evolution as an artist didn’t begin until he started to see the materials he had worked with his entire life with new eyes.

Suddenly, flat metal from the penstock (the structure that corrals water before it powers a wooden waterwheel), which Sawyer salvaged when the four-story wooden Georges River Woolen Mill in Warren was being dismantled, became material for a sculpture. Rusty railroad spikes became fodder for a sphere. The worn sprockets from a mussel-washer on a sixty-five-foot mussel dragger were cut in half to become an early Sawyer sculpture, “Sprocket Sphere.” And the few random contents of a bucket snagged from a Damariscotta barn—a massive beam staple, a rusty pole-band, and five cast iron spikes of varying lengths—became

the elegantly simple sculpture “Head Dress.”

“I dumped out the bucket and thought, ‘What can I make with just this,’” says Sawyer of the piece. He works intuitively and organically. He insists that just handling the materials, the rusty scraps and salvage, is a major part of the process of discovery when sculpting. He is a man who likes to get his hands dirty. Sawyer is, after all, more likely to use his thirty-two ton excavator—lovingly named Big Bertha—to make a piece of art, than he is to use a paintbrush. He takes up torches and grinders, not turpentine and oil paint.

IN 1961, JAY SAWYER WAS BORN into a blue-collar childhood in Rockland. During his childhood, his father was a pipefitter at Bath Iron Works, his mother a homemaker to five children and worked in the personal care field before entering the medical field. After Sawyer graduated high school in 1979, he beat around the midcoast working various jobs for a few years before heading down the peninsula to attend the Maine Maritime Academy in Castine, where he earned a bachelor’s

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degree in marine engineering. Less than a year later, Sawyer shipped out on an Exxon oil tanker. For eight hours a day for the next five years, he was the engineer in charge of the engine room.

When Sawyer said goodbye to the high seas and settled on solid ground, he and his wife Karen, high school sweethearts, purchased their property in Warren. Sawyer kept busy with his commercial welding business, Sawyer's Welding & Mobile Repair. Though he did not know it then, his small business and propensity for "not throwing anything out"—there are three boxcars, two tractor trailers, and a school bus scattered across Stemwinder, among countless other things—would become the material foundation of his art. It was not long before Sawyer began imagining new ways to repurpose his salvaged detritus and twisted metal.

"I'd been doing a lot of work with landscape architects and contractors that was really forcing me to be more creative than ever," says Sawyer. "I suppose that really sparked the desire toward more art."

A longtime appreciator of sculpture, Sawyer saw a metal sphere while cruising art galleries about five years ago. He swung into welder mode and examined the piece closely. He was immediately critical of the sphere's engineering and execution. "So I went home and made my own," Sawyer laughs. The respected Maine sculptor Marilyn Quint-Rose, an early champion of Sawyer's work, soon purchased his first sphere.

Along with the Maine sculptor David McLaughlin—who told him to embrace working with "rusty stuff"—Sawyer says that Quint-Rose was one of his most influential mentors. He recalls their early conversations with a sense of wonderment as Quint-Rose walked him through composition and theory.

"It was like we were talking a different language...this wasn't the kind of conversation I was used to having," laughs the artist, a burly man who at the time was more accustomed to construction-site banter than art-gallery chitchat.

Despite having only a single sculpture under his belt, Sawyer was hooked. He has been exhibiting his work since 2006, including high-profile group shows at Rockport's Center for Maine Contempo-

rary Art and Portland's highly respected June Fitzpatrick Gallery.

Sawyer is not an MFA student who has doggedly produced work for years and years, then arrived on the art scene seemingly fully formed with his vision and voice locked in place. Rather, Sawyer is something of an everyman hooked by the snare that is the opiate of creation. The public is therefore afforded the opportunity to watch a new artist not just emerge but evolve. And Sawyer's appreciators are already a passionate bunch.

"Jay is one of the most talented metal sculptors around," says designer Debbie Chatfield, owner of Chatfield Design in Rockport. "Jay is the only person I know that can take apart an old tractor and turn it into an object of beauty and wonder."

Beauty and wonder are just what Sawyer aims for in both his work and his sculpture garden. Stemwinder, he explains, is a word that dates back to 1842, when the French watchmaker Adrien Philippe invented a "keyless" watch that could be wound by turning its "stem." While it seems a simple achievement today, Philippe's invention earned him a gold medal at the French Industrial World's Fair in 1844.

These days, stemwinder is an old-fashioned expression used to describe something remarkable.

A MILE DOWN THE ROAD from Sawyer's farmhouse, at the center of Warren village along the edge of the St. George River, there is a new town park where the Georges River Woolen Mill once stood. Built in 1790, the mill became Crowe Rope in the mid-1960s, a company that manufactured rope of all sorts, including clothesline and rope strong enough to tie a tugboat at dock.


When the old wooden mill was dismantled in 2004, Sawyer was on-hand to rescue as many remnants as he could. Last year, the town hired him to weld an iron railing along the embankment. In its center, Sawyer created a large panel sculpture entitled "Sunrise at Woolen Mill Park" using salvaged cogs, gears, iron, and steel. It is his first piece of public art, and it just happens to be located in the middle of his hometown.

Today, Sawyer stands on the bridge beside the park and explains how the town

dips alewives from the St. George each year to sell as bait fish, with the revenue funding the local fire department. Memories flood back as Sawyer talks: his grandparents used to live just up the hill; he was the only kid in town who dared barrel down that hill on his skateboard; a bully once dangled him over the bridge by his ankles; his first job at fifteen years old was at the small grocery across the street; and that bridge was a popular spot for local boys to meet up with girls.

"To think of how it's all come full circle," muses Sawyer as he motions to his sculpture in the park. Down the river, a hawk glides on the wind and stalks the shallows. "We used to cause some trouble under that bridge," he laughs.

Sawyer is still getting comfortable with referring to himself as an artist. Sometimes, he refers to his life as a sculptor as his "second life."

"I don't know," he pauses after using the phrase. "I guess. If that's what you call it." A smile spreads across his face. 

*JOSHUA BODWELL is the executive director of the Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance. He is a regular contributor to magazines such as Art New England, Down East, Poets & Writers, and an contributing editor of Fiction Writers Review. A recipient of the Maine Community Foundation's Martin Dibner Fellowship for fiction, his short stories have appeared in The Three-penny Review, Ambit (England), Northern New England Review, and Tears in the Fence (England). Joshua also currently serves as creative director of Engine, an arts nonprofit in Biddeford that he co-founded. His web site is [www.joshuabodwell.com](http://www.joshuabodwell.com).*

*"For the past three years, I have profiled established artists for Discovery Coast," says Joshua. "Jay Sawyer's rapid progress as an emerging artist and his no-nonsense approach to art drew me to profiling him this year. Jay is the real deal: an artist driven to make art from the scraps of the world around him. His work is honest work."*

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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