Christopher Fennell grew up in Florida doing construction work, then got an engineering degree from the University of South Florida and went to work for Motorola Inc. in robotics. A job with British Aerospace designing flight simulators in Tampa, Fla., followed, but Fennell said he got bored with using existing components to design things. He wanted to create from scratch. So he went back to school and earned a MFA degree from the University of Georgia. One of his professors wanted him to tear down an old barn, which inspired Fennell to build his first colossal sculpture. ‘I saw the barn falling down, and then the idea came to build a wave,’ Fennell said. He built the barn ‘wave’ in 2000 at UGA, then followed it by fusing 150 bicycles together to create a ‘tornado’ in 2001. Using discarded objects to create sculpture has become his theme.”

Source: Clair Osborn, Austin American Statesman, “Turning Two Pest into Art”, June 20, 2005
Shovel Gateway

Installation for UC Davis’
California Native Plant GATEway
Garden

17’ x 10’ x 16’ high    2000lbs

Matl: found shovel heads
1.25” diameter 11 ga steel pipe

Path Width = 10’

Artist: Christopher Fennell
Artist in the market for old canoes

Chris Fennell explains project he plans to build near Interstate Bridge

BY SANDRA L. LEE
OF THE TRIBUNE

LAPWAI — Building a wave out of canoes would be clever in Tampa, Fla., but at Lewiston on where the Snake and Clearwater rivers meet, “it all fits,” artist Chris Fennell said Tuesday.

Fennell has been commissioned to build a 23-foot tall wave on the bank of the northern pond adjacent to Interstate Bridge in Lewiston. That piece and two “Siers” that will encircle the base of the fountains in both ponds flanking the bridge will be made of discarded canoes.

He needs about 80 canoes, either aluminum or fiberglass, 60 for the wave and 10 each for the flowers. So far he has eight donated last year by Camp Wooten in Washington.

The search is on, Fennell said at a gathering at the Lapwai Nez Perce Senior Center. Truthfully, he added, he’s starting to feel a little panicked as the Oct. 1 planned start of construction nears. He’s paying $100 for fiberglass and $150 for aluminum, and he’ll help with transportation, in return for which that old canoe will become a part of the area’s history.

Fennell, 44, lives in Birmingham, Ala., and grew up near Tampa. When he learned the city of Lewiston was seeking proposals for an art piece that would be partially funded with Lewis and Clark Bicentennial money, his first thought was of the explorers padding the rivers, he said.

With that image in mind, and his reputation of using recycled materials for pieces such as a bicycle tornado and baseball bat entry to a baseball park, he drew up his proposal and came in first out of 20 submissions.

Fennell, who began doing art work seriously 10 years ago, said his goal has always been to do things that everyone would “get,” including children. Using things that people throw away makes it contemporary art.

He recalls Lewiston Parks and Recreation Director Lynn C. Moss telling him this community doesn’t understand contemporary art, and asking how he would explain it. His response was that if a 5-year-old is told it’s made out of canoes, he will want to see it, and that universal attraction with an element of fun is what art is all about.

It’s been a struggle to be recognized, but with “green” becoming the big thing even in the art world, it’s happening, he said.

In 2002, after obtaining his master of fine arts degree, he spent about three years sleeping in his pickup truck, criss-crossing the country to commissions in Wyoming, to Texas, then to Vermont, and down to Maryland, teaching and doing home construction and repairs in between.

In 2004, he gave up the side jobs to devote full time to sculpture, but those early construction skills continue to influence what he does. He’s a welder and a carpenter, and builds to the power of four, he said, making sure “four drunk frat boys can’t dismantle one of his works.

His creations stand in front of museums in Davenport, Iowa, and Chattanooga, Tenn., and on the southern tip of Key West, Fla.

In the past three years, public art jobs such as this one have allowed him to do more than pay for diesel and upkeep on the truck, he said.

When he graduated, “we thought the ones who got teaching jobs were lucky. Now they look at me and say, ‘you’re doing it.’”

The wave or a vortex is a consistent theme. Everything he does has the feel of things moving, he said. With the canoes, “I will try to get lines of color because it makes it flow.”

The Lewiston project also will have a companion piece, as yet undetermined, that will be contributed by the Nez Perce Tribe. The Nez Perce were river people before the time of horses and the intent is to explain that evolution and the historical connection, said Ann McCormack, economic development planner with the tribe.

The area around the central piece also likely will be planted with indigenous plants and shrubs recognized in the journals of the explorers.

Fennell wants his pieces to fit their environment, but he’s still looking for a buyer for one he envisions: a giant tortoise whose shell segments would be made of Volkswagen Beetle tops welded together.

For now, though, he faces that Oct. 1 deadline to find 72 more canoes. He can be reached at cfennell@cfennell.org, and his telephone numbers are on his website.

Moss may be reached at Lewiston Parks and Recreation Department, 1424 Main St.

Sculptor Chris Fennell talks about his work at the Lapwai Senior Center Tuesday, including the canoe wave work he will create for the Lewiston levee pond area.

This is artist Chris Fennell’s conception of a canoe wave to be installed at the levee ponds flanking Interstate Bridge.