



**PANTONE OF THE  
CUYAHOGA RIVER** 2025  
A Public Art Project by Cuyahoga Valley Art Center

**MURAL**

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# INTRODUCTION



For many years, Cuyahoga Valley Art Center (CVAC) has envisioned ways to extend creativity beyond our gallery walls and into the surrounding community. While our exhibitions and classrooms have long served as a hub for practicing artists, we have always believed that art should also live in the public landscape, accessible to everyone, every day. The east-facing exterior wall of our building presented a unique opportunity to bring that vision to life.

Highly visible from both State Route 8 and Portage Trail, this wall overlooks a vibrant and growing area of downtown Cuyahoga Falls. With more than 80,000 vehicles passing by daily, the location offers a powerful platform for public art—one that can inspire residents, visitors, and commuters alike. Transforming this space into a large-scale mural allows art to reach far beyond the doors of CVAC.

In 2024, CVAC applied for support through the ArtsForward grant program administered by ArtsNow, a regional initiative that invests in creative projects that strengthen our community. We were honored to receive \$25,000 in funding to help launch this ambitious public art project. This grant allowed us to take the first steps toward transforming the wall into a landmark piece of public artwork.

With funding secured, the next step was identifying the right artist to bring this vision to life. In December 2024, CVAC launched a formal selection process inviting artists to submit their qualifications and ideas for the project.

# ARTIST SELECTION PROCESS

Cuyahoga Valley Art Center issued a Call for Qualifications (CFQ) in December 2024, inviting artists to submit materials for consideration. The opportunity was shared widely throughout the regional arts community to reach experienced muralists and public artists interested in contributing to this highly visible project.

CVAC received an overwhelming response from the practicing artist community, with 21 applications submitted for consideration. A selection committee representing both the art center and the broader community carefully reviewed each submission, evaluating artistic merit, experience with large-scale murals, and the artist's ability to create a work that would reflect the spirit of the Cuyahoga River and the surrounding community.

After an extensive review process, the committee selected Cleveland-based artist Derek Brennan to lead the project. His thoughtful artistic vision and experience in creating dynamic public artwork made him an ideal partner to bring this landmark mural to life.

**Call for Qualifications Issued:**  
December 2024

**Artist Applications Received:**  
21

**Finalists Interviewed:**  
2

**Artist Selected:**  
January 2025

**Lead Artist:**  
Derek Brennan

## Artist Selection Committee



**Kayla Billings, CVAC**  
Director of Programming & Community Relations



**Danielle Dieterich, CVAC**  
Executive Director



**Kit Palencar, CVAC**  
Exhibitions Manager



**Kaylee Piper,**  
Executive Director  
Downtown Cuyahoga Falls Partnership

# ARTIST: DEREK BRENNAN



Cuyahoga Valley Art Center selected Cleveland-based artist Derek Brennan to create the mural Pantone of the Cuyahoga River following a competitive review process in early 2025.

Brennan is known for his painterly mural style that blends bold color, movement, and storytelling. His work often incorporates subtle visual details that reward close observation with hidden elements, layered textures, and moments of discovery that invite viewers to engage more deeply with the artwork. This ability to balance large-scale visual impact with intimate detail made his approach especially well-suited to the highly visible exterior wall at CVAC.

In developing the concept for the mural, Brennan drew inspiration from the natural rhythms, colors, and wildlife of the Cuyahoga River. His creative process focuses on translating the environment and spirit of a place into visual language, capturing both the movement of water and the life that surrounds it.

Equally important to Brennan's practice is community engagement. Rather than creating a mural in isolation, he works to involve the community throughout the process, inviting conversation, feedback, and creative participation along the way. Through artist talks, student workshops, and public events, Brennan ensured that the mural would reflect not only his artistic vision but also the voices of the community it represents.



# TIME LINE COMMUNITY EVENTS

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MARCH  
21, 2025

## **Community Event:** Cuyahoga Falls High School Art Club

Brennan's first community engagement activity brought him to Cuyahoga Falls High School, where he met with 15 members of the Art Club. After sharing his artistic journey and discussing the realities of working as a professional muralist, students participated in a hands-on activity creating their own mock-up designs for the CVAC mural wall. Their ideas helped spark early inspiration for the final concept.



Collage Project led by Derek Brennan with Cuyahoga Falls High School Art Club



Artist Presentation by Derek Brennan at Cuyahoga Valley Art Center

MARCH  
28, 2025

## **Community Event:** Artist Talk at CVAC

During the Artist Reception for CVAC's Figurative Exhibition, Brennan presented a 35-minute artist talk exploring his style, influences, and mural-making process. More than 120 attendees joined the event, gaining insight into how the mural would evolve and asking questions about his approach to public art.

# TIME LINE COMMUNITY EVENTS

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APRIL  
2, 2025

## Initial Concept Revealed

CVAC shared Brennan's first rendering of *Pantone of the Cuyahoga River* through social media and the organization's website, giving the community its first glimpse of the emerging mural design.



Initial Design Concept from Derek Brennan



All City Art Walk Engagement, Derek Brennan creating Caricatures of community Members at the Event

APRIL  
24, 2025

## Community Event: All City Art Walk

As part of the annual All City Art Walk, Brennan interacted with more than 1,000 community participants, discussing the mural and sharing insights into his creative process. Visitors also had the opportunity to participate in his caricature drawing activities, creating a lively and memorable engagement with the artist.

# TIME LINE COMMUNITY EVENTS

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MAY  
30, 2025

## Final Rendering Completed

Brennan delivered the finalized mural design, incorporating feedback gathered through community conversations and events while maintaining his distinctive artistic vision.



Final Rendering from Derek Brennan



Community Event at Akron Art Museum,  
Lecture Led by Derek Brennan

JUNE  
25, 2025

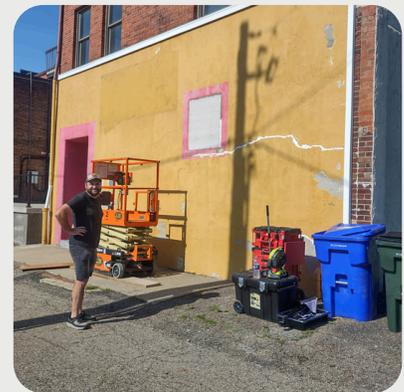
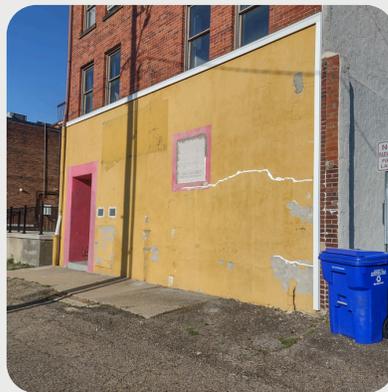
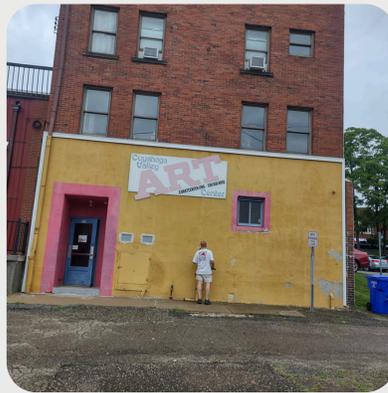
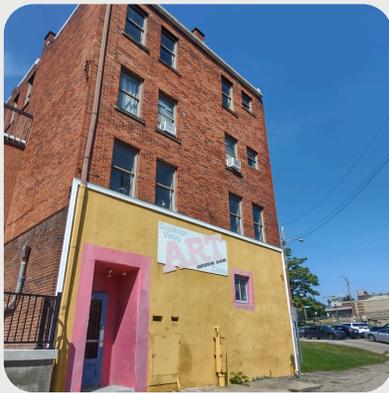
## Community Event: Akron Art Museum Community Program

In partnership with the Akron Art Museum, CVAC hosted a special evening of community engagement attended by 30 guests. The program included a hands-on collage activity inspired by Brennan's creative process, followed by an artist talk and guided museum tour, connecting the mural project to the broader regional arts landscape.

# PREPAIRING THE WALL

Before painting could begin, the exterior wall required careful preparation to ensure it would provide a strong and lasting surface for the mural. This work was led by CVAC Executive Director Danielle Dieterich, alongside her father, Ward Dieterich, whose time and expertise helped make the project possible. Together, they completed the extensive cleaning, surface preparation, and repair work necessary to ready the wall for the artist's installation.

Additional support came from Air Comfort, who assisted by replacing the HVAC vents located along the wall. By completing much of the preparation work in-house and with the help of community partners, CVAC was able to responsibly steward the ArtsForward grant funding and CVAC's building reserves. This collaborative effort reflects the spirit of community partnership that has guided the project from the beginning.



# PAINTING THE WALL

## DAY 1

### Primer & Doodle Grid

To transfer the mural design accurately onto the large wall, Derek used a **doodle grid**—a loose, hand-drawn grid system made of doodles that divides the artwork into manageable sections. By recreating each section square by square on the wall, the full composition could be scaled up while maintaining the proportions of the original design.



# PAINTING THE WALL

## DAY 2

### Blocking & Beaver

As painting began on day two, Derek started blocking in large sections of color to establish the foundation of the mural, beginning with the beaver. Throughout the day, he welcomed conversations with curious passersby, sharing insights into his process and connecting the community directly with the creation of the artwork.



# PAINTING THE WALL

## DAY 3

### Back Door

By the third day of painting, Derek completed his work on the beaver and began developing sections of the mural surrounding the back entrance of the building. Despite blazing heat and heavy humidity, steady progress continued as the mural's early forms and colors became more defined.



# PAINTING THE WALL

## DAY 4

### The Heron Comes to Life

Rain delayed the fourth day of painting, but Derek returned the following day ready to continue, working through lingering humidity. By the end of the session, he completed the section featuring the heron, bringing another key element of the mural to life.



# PAINTING THE WALL

## DAY 5

### The Turtle Comes to Life

On the fifth day of painting, the turtle began to take shape as Derek brought the character to life with color and detail. He also focused on developing the lower sections of the mural, adding many of the finishing elements that help anchor the composition along the base of the wall.

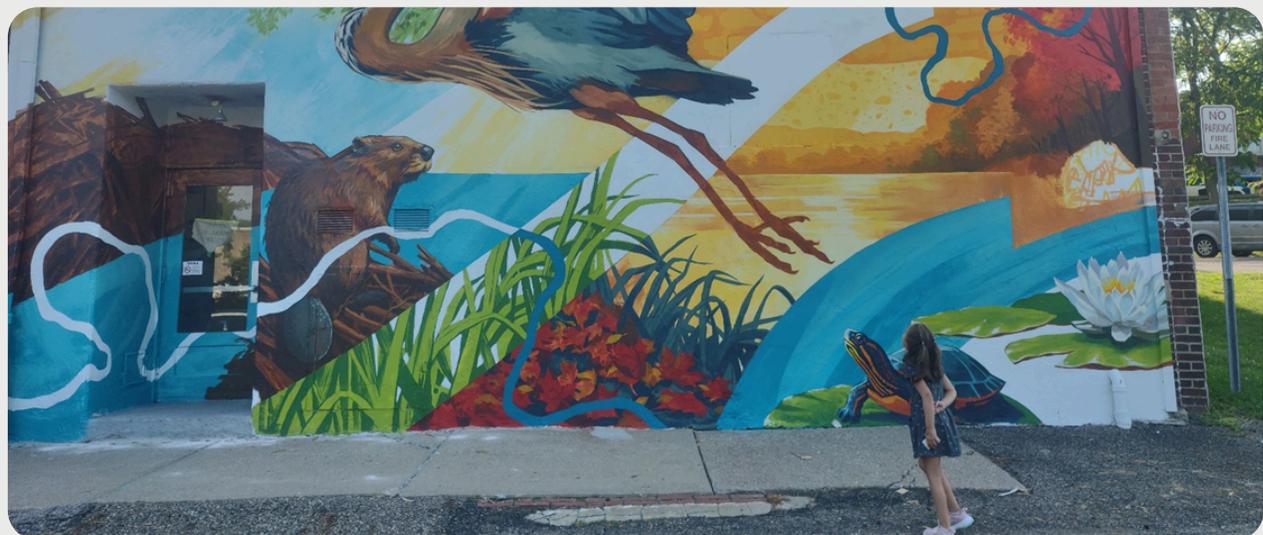
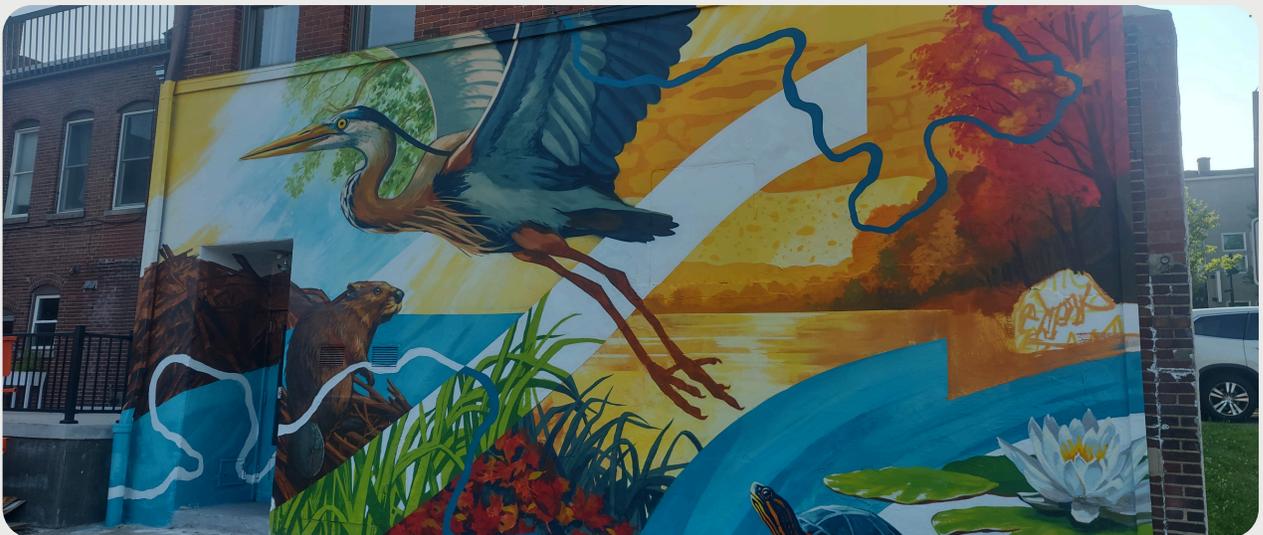


# PAINTING THE WALL

## DAY 6

### Foliage Laid In

By the sixth day of painting, most of the doodle grid had disappeared as Derek filled in the remaining background areas of the mural. With the major sections now blocked in, he began focusing on additional layers of detail that added depth and movement to the composition.



# PAINTING THE WALL

## DAY 7

### Mural is Almost Complete

On day seven, the mural reached 99% completion as Derek finished painting in the fox and refined the surrounding details. In a fun final touch, he added an extra turtle to the composition, giving the river scene one more lively character.



# PAINTING THE WALL

## DAY 8

### Final Details & Protective Coating

During day eight, Derek completed the final details and added his signature to the mural. He then carefully applied a UV-resistant coating over the entire surface, protecting the artwork and helping preserve its color and longevity for years to come.



# RIBBON CUTTING EVENT

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## AUGUST 22, 2025

The completion of the *Pantone of the Cuyahoga River* mural was celebrated with a ribbon-cutting that brought hundreds of community members together to mark the unveiling of Cuyahoga Valley Art Center's newest public artwork. Residents, artists, board members, and supporters gathered outside CVAC to witness the mural officially become part of the public landscape of Cuyahoga Falls. In a memorable moment, Derek Brennan's daughter had the honor of cutting the ribbon, symbolizing both the completion of the mural and the community spirit that helped bring the project to life.

The celebration welcomed many leaders and partners from across the community. Mayor Don Walters, city elected officials, and members of the city staff joined the festivities, along with Cuyahoga Falls Library Executive Director Alex Gedeon and members of the library staff. Their presence highlighted the strong partnerships that support arts and culture throughout the city. Community supporters from across the region also came out to celebrate the mural and the collaborative effort behind its creation.



# RIBBON CUTTING EVENT

## AUGUST 22, 2025

Following the ceremony, guests were invited to stay and enjoy hors d'oeuvres, drinks, and time with the artist. Attendees had the opportunity to speak with Derek Brennan about his creative process and the inspiration behind the mural. Visitors also participated in a hands-on printmaking activity featuring the mural's beloved river creatures, allowing community members of all ages to create their own artistic keepsake from this special day.



# CULTURAL IMPACT OF PUBLIC ART

Public art has the power to transform shared spaces, spark curiosity, and strengthen a community's connection to place. Projects like *Pantone of the Cuyahoga River* reflect Cuyahoga Valley Art Center's commitment to making art accessible beyond the walls of our galleries and classrooms—bringing creativity directly into the everyday lives of residents and visitors alike.

In 2025, CVAC generated an **estimated \$305,700 in direct cultural value** through free exhibitions, subsidized classes, scholarships, public art initiatives, and community partnerships. When including the visibility and outreach impact of projects like this mural, the organization's **total community impact reached approximately \$405,700**. With an annual operating budget of just under \$290,000, this represents **\$1.45 in direct cultural value for every \$1 invested in CVAC**.

National research further reinforces the importance of arts organizations in community development. According to Americans for the Arts' Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 (AEP6) study, nonprofit arts organizations typically generate an additional 2:1 return in indirect economic and social benefits through increased local spending, tourism, and improved community wellbeing. When applying this nationally recognized model, **CVAC's broader community impact reaches nearly \$2.86 in value** for every dollar invested, demonstrating how grassroots arts organizations help strengthen the cultural and economic fabric of Summit County.

**Today, *Pantone of the Cuyahoga River* stands as a vibrant reflection of the natural beauty, creativity, and collaborative spirit that define the Cuyahoga Falls community.**

This project would not have been possible without the generous support of **ArtsNow** and the **ArtsForward** selection committee. Their commitment to strengthening arts and culture in our region helped bring this vibrant new landmark to life.

**2025  
CVAC Cultural  
Impact**

**\$305,700  
Direct Cultural  
Value Generated**

**\$405,700  
Total Community  
Impact**

**\$1.45  
Returned for Every  
\$1 Invested**