



## THE ARTIST BEHIND THE POSTER *Running Against the Current*

Salmon, the iconic fish of the Northwest, have a powerful draw for John Simon, this year's poster artist. "Every time I paint them, I dream of their ability to survive," the artist wrote in a calendar dedicated to saving the Northwest's revered king salmon. For years, the kings have been threatened by overfishing and a degraded environment.

"The salmon are a primary source of knowledge as to what is happening in the waters around us," says the artist, whose works hang in major venues throughout the Northwest. "They are also a primary source of our mythology, because their mystery is almost unfathomable."

Simon's 2010 Skagit River Poetry Festival poster portrays the fish in their glorious fall spawning colors, strokes of red and green hurling into turbulent white. The fish maneuver upstream through rocks and rushing water, seeking their native streambeds, the birthplace where they will reproduce and die. The river is swift, its path compressed, and droplets spatter Pollock-like across the surface of the canvas, testament to the forces at play.

It is a difficult journey, to run against current -- a metaphor for the life of many artists. "This upriver journey of the salmon, it seems like a battle, but it's just a natural way for some people to get to their best -- they have to keep pushing on," says Simon. "It's a long, hard road, and it doesn't come easy, not for some of us. Poets know it, as well as artists like me."

Simon, born in Illinois, was drawn to the Skagit Valley by its beauty and abundance. He has planted gardens in its rich delta soil, fished its creeks and rivers, staged acclaimed art shows in its honor and celebrated its magic in a myriad of art forms.

Arriving in the valley in the 1970s with an MFA from the prestigious Cranbrook Academy of Art, he taught stained glass art at Skagit Valley College for several years. He also found expression in carving and printmaking.

Right now, Simon, who lives in the historic little town of Edison, is making paintings that resemble prints, using a subtle brown paint. "It's warm, monochromatic, very tactile. It will go anywhere."

Locals who've known Simon over the decades describe the avid environmentalist as "Mother Nature's Son" and "The Green Man." Always, at the heart of his work, is the

natural world around him. It's why he came to the valley. It is what feeds him, and it is what he expresses.

"Here, we have always been nature-oriented," says the artist. "Nature is our main essence, our inspiration."