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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Cult vibes in the best way: Shannon Wynne's exclusive Caddo Lake party and art unveiling

The restaurateur invites 140 or so guests to his private property in East Texas to reveal a new Brad Oldham sculpture. Snakes and swamps abound, and high culture meets the wild.



Guests of restaurateur Shannon Wynne's art unveiling party on May 18 were welcomed to his Caddo lake home by the man himself. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

By [Sarah Hepola](#)

11:17 AM on May 31, 2024



Correction: A previous version of this story named a restaurant not owned by Wynne.

On April 11, an email arrived in my inbox. Subject line: "Caddo Lake Unveiling." The email took me to a trailer that began on a dark screen, the shimmy of a tambourine like a rattlesnake tail as words appeared: *Featuring the work of Brad Oldham Sculpture.*

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Well, this was different.

The trailer was short, but a far cry from your typical Evite: Grainy footage of a scruffy musician at a recording session. "Snake Farm," he sang, and I'd barely processed any of this before details scrolled into view: May 18, Johnson's Ranch on Caddo Lake. "You are invited to this event because you love good art, or because we owe you money," read one screen, all of which gave me cult vibes in the best possible way.



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The email was from [Shannon Wynne](#), the fabled Dallas restaurateur behind the Flying Saucer, the Flying Fish, and Rodeo Goat, home of my favorite burger ([Royale with Cheese](#), medium rare). I'd never met Wynne, but I knew about him: Son of

Angus Wynne, the man behind Wynnewood shopping center and Six Flags Over Texas.

What I did not realize is that Shannon Wynne owns a home on [Caddo Lake](#), a magical and mysterious place in a state full of them, and that every once in a while, he hosts parties for an intimate roster of guests in order to unveil some new art acquisition. In 2022, he hosted a party so epic that the folks at *The Dallas Morning News* who'd gone told me there was only one answer to this summons. *Yes*.

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Nikki Carter, left, and Steve Smelley chit-chat at the Johnson's Ranch Marina in Uncertain, Texas. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

Caddo Lake is the only natural lake in Texas, some have said, a swampy expanse of shallow water where bald cypress drips with Spanish moss. Roughly three hours east of Dallas, it feels a bit like another planet, the kind of eerily remote spot where a person could disappear from the law. Not that I would ever do that, officer. I stayed in the nearby town of Jefferson, with its quaint downtown square, and I booked a room at the [Historic Jefferson Hotel](#), where owners Jeromy and Pam Jones really lean into the spot's reputation as "the most haunted hotel in the world." In the hallway outside my room, my companion and I passed googly-eyed baby dolls, clown paintings, a mannequin in an antique coffin.

"We don't have to stay here," I told him as we walked into our room to find an antique metal diving suit in the corner, like something out of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. "Oh, we're staying here," he replied, setting down our bags. Whatever ghosts happened to be sharing space with us, they were gentle that weekend.

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On the afternoon of May 18, we drove 20 minutes through the piney woods toward the town of Uncertain (population 83), situated on the border with Louisiana. We parked at Johnson's Point and headed for the dock, where partygoers in floral sundresses and floppy straw hats were already loading onto pontoons and heading toward adventure. I stepped inside a little wooden shack of a store where a brunette named Nikki worked the register, and a bearded fellow named Steve Smelley sat at the counter like a regular at the bar.

"What happens in Caddo stays on Caddo," he told us, giving a cackle, which felt like the proper introduction.

The real city of Uncertain is little known to Dallas folk, who tend to prefer grand shopping malls and giant sports stadiums to the small-town quirk of a place that touts its reputation for Bigfoot sightings. Uncertain is one of my favorite towns in Texas, filled with characters who could each hold down their own reality show. Smelley told tales of partying with a young Matthew McConaughey back in the '80s as Nikki showed me an iPhone video of local raccoons being hand-fed. Outside on the dock, the crowd was country-club chic, silvered hair and trendy glasses. Shortly after 3 p.m., my companion and I boarded our own pontoon whose name was written in cursive on the side: Party Barge.



Caddo Lake is one of the most magical and mysterious spots in Texas, but it's still little-known to many folks in the state. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

I don't know if you've seen [*The Menu*](#), the foodie thriller where a group of pampered sensualists travel to an island for the ultimate chef's menu, but I was thinking of that 2022 movie as our group set out on the murky lake, the fumes of non-ethanol gas stinging the air (no emissions standards on boats).

"Have you seen *True Blood*?" asked our guide Chaz Warren as we passed a sagging structure with peeling white paint at the water's edge. Known as the Tea Room, the creepy shack is so steeped in atmosphere it was featured in the [opening credits](#) of the HBO vampire series. Warren plucked out a cigarette from his red pack, a brand called Eagle 20's, as he steered us through yellow spatterdock and American lotus toward our destination.

I should mention that in *The Menu*, the bucket-list meal on the remote island turns out to be a revenge scheme concocted by a sadistic chef played by Ralph Fiennes.

Not to ruin the movie, but it gets dark. *Fish in a barrel*, I thought, as the pontoon docked near a big house situated atop a sloping green lawn.

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Chaz Warren, center, explains the finer points of Caddo Lake on a pontoon headed toward Shannon Wynne's property. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

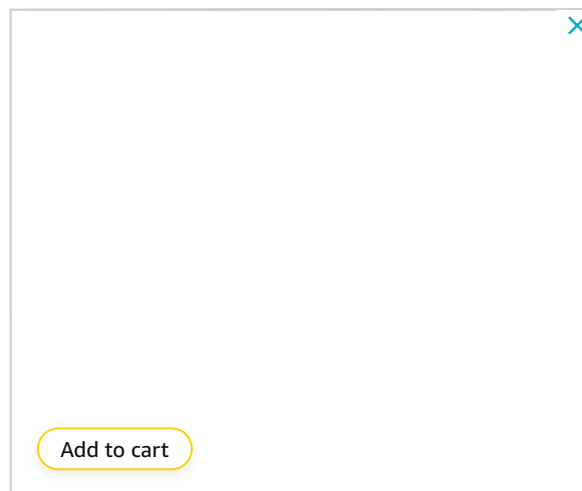
But the tall and lanky man greeting us was a less sinister and more benevolent ringleader, in his khaki cargo shorts and white safari shirt, yellow scarf around his

neck. Shannon Wynne may be best known for his restaurants, including the era-defining 8.0 of the '80s and '90s, but he's also one of the people who makes Dallas a better city, a [philanthropist](#) and an art collector who specializes in Texas names.

"I see you did not heed my warning," he gently teased a beautiful blonde in a flowy white dress as she lightly stumbled in her wedge heels stepping onto the dock, and he reached out to steady her.

"You said dress comfortable," she said, embracing him. "I'm wearing a hat."

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I'd been unclear on what to wear, too. I was going for "fashionable but rugged" when I paired a cotton V-neck and black skirt with turquoise cowboy boots, but I felt a stab of envy as we walked toward the 140 or so partygoers, sipping craft brews and lime cocktails on a multitiered patio overlooking the lake. These folks had dressed the part for an uncommon garden party — men in button-downs, women in chunky jewelry and sunglasses. It felt more Los Angeles than Dallas: Everyone looked like they might own a tech company or a small corporation, and I suspect some of them did.

I recognized a few faces: [Bud Kennedy](#), longtime *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* scribe. KERA arts editor [Anne Bothwell](#), formerly of *The News*, and food maven [Sarah Blaskovich](#), currently of *The News*. I chatted with [Nell Potasznik-Langford](#), a Dallas artist who curates Wynne's collection, and she clued me in to a few more bold-faced

names: Fort Worth sculptor/painter Nancy Lamb, Dallas photographer Kent Barker, John and Marlene Sughrue of the Dallas Art Fair.



Guests eat crawfish, fried catfish, hush puppies, and more at a buffet feast on Shannon Wynne's Caddo Lake property. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

It's intimidating to face a group of people who recognize each other but not you, and I temporarily sought shelter in a shady spot that could have been plunked down from Fort Worth's Japanese Gardens. A tinkling pond of koi flanked by bamboo, the sculpture of a voluptuous woman lounging on the side, a sculpture that turned out to be by one-time University of Texas professor Charles Umlauf. Marvin Gaye was playing on the sound system, followed by Frank Sinatra, and I tapped notes on my iPhone as a friendly mother and daughter joined me.

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Rose Wright and her daughter Valeria Garcia came because Rose's husband [C. Jai Wright](#) did landscaping on the property (business motto: "God's living art"). We stood under a cypress tree so enormous I wondered how long it had been in that spot, and when C. Jai joined us, he explained cypress are naturally quite tall. The ones sticking up from the lake were stunted by the water, and I will admit a second stab of envy for this vista that was somehow both natural and manicured at once. In the distance, fat guineas and chickens pecked around the lawn near a large silver sculpture of a man with giant hands, a 2022 unveiling that was the centerpiece of the previous Caddo Lake party.



C. Jai Wright stands near some of the trees he planted at Shannon Wynne's Caddo Lake property. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

I was so focused on the crowd, I hadn't noticed a giant white tarp at the center of the bustle. It was only when Wynne took the microphone to greet the crowd, the lake stretching behind him, that I realized it was our reason for gathering.

"What you see over my shoulder looks like a beautiful place, but it is not a nice place all the time," he said. "This is not Cedar Creek Lake."

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Wynne is the kind of skilled interlocutor who can talk about one thing but teach you about 10: Caddo is home to 216 species of birds, 47 animals and 90 reptiles, including snakes.

That last part was significant, but before we understood why, a few data points: Caddo has witnessed all six flags over Texas. It was the site of the first off-shore oil well, as well as the Pearl Rush of the early 20th century (had to Google that one). Wynne only spoke for 10 minutes, but he hopscotched from the 16th-century invasion of the Spaniards to the pragmatism of beaver pelts in pioneer days, how the port town of Jefferson became an entryway for this new thing called “ice.”

My head was spinning: There was the Louisiana Purchase, then a guy named Santa Anna murdering his way north, and somehow this resolved in the tale of Texas independence legend Harriet Potter Ames, whose story is told in the riveting 1959 book, *Love Is a Wild Assault* by Elithe Hamilton Kirkland. Oh, and Lady Bird Johnson's uncle owned this property and made ice for the general store.



Shannon Wynne, left, sculptor Brad Oldham and his wife and collaborator Christy Coltrin pose for a photograph at Wynne's Caddo Lake property, where Wynne unveiled his newly acquired Oldham sculpture, "Rat Snake." (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

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“But we’re here to see the newest work by a Dallas artist,” Wynne said, as though reminding himself. Brad Oldham stood on the periphery in a blue baseball cap and khakis. I didn’t know Oldham, a friendly middle-aged guy who could pass for a sports fan at your local bar, but I knew his iconic Dallas work, *The Traveling Man-Walking Tall*, the whimsical and bendy silver statue which I have described as “that big robot in Deep Ellum.” Wynne had been passing the statue on his way to the office, and it occurred to him that Oldham would be the right guy for his next commission.

“We tell stories through sculpture for a living,” Oldham told the crowd. He’d arrived via helicopter, a bit of theater thanks to fellow partygoers who commissioned this dramatic in-and-out (as the story was told at the event), so they could also attend a birthday party in Dallas that evening. But Oldham had none of the flash that might accompany such a rock-star arrival. He seemed soft-spoken and modest as he ceded the microphone to his wife and collaborator Christy Coltrin, a sunny blonde in a white button-up with a snake embroidered over one shoulder. It was her job to find the story; it was Oldham’s job to build it.

“We gave a lot of options to Shannon,” she told the crowd, “and he said no to all of them.” A laugh from the audience. That was Wynne: A man who knew what he wanted. “What you’re going to see is his vision,” she explained, and with that, the reveal was here.

I heard the scrape of the plastic tarp before I knew what was happening, and I looked up toward the house to see a huge black rattlesnake coiled along one step, tongue flicking the air like a lightning split. Oldham gave the fine-print details: The sculpture was 32 feet laid out, made in a bronze cast that weighed over 500 pounds. He didn’t want a lift on the property; instead, he enlisted seven friends to carry the snake to its new home.

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Artist Brad Oldham's sculpture "Rat Snake" at Shannon Wynne's Caddo Lake property. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

Most sculpture eludes me. I don't "get" it, and I couldn't tell you if the failure lies in me, or the work, but this Oldham sculpture — titled *Rat Snake* — could be so easily gotten. What more did you need, exactly? A cool black snake, poised to strike. Was he a good snake or a bad snake? Was he a "he"? Mysteries abounded. Snakes are obvious villains (see Disney movies, or the Bible), but they are also secret protagonists. As Wynne took the microphone again, he explained as much.

“Without snakes, we’re overrun with vermin,” he said. “So, the great thing about a rat snake is that it’s not aggressive. It just wants to do its job.” The sculpture had a personal meaning, too: The Wynne family divided itself into “snakes and mongooses,” the former being born into the family, the latter being bound by legal contract. “If you’re married into the family, you’re a mongoose,” Wynne explained, before delivering the punchline: “The only thing that can kill a snake.”



A helicopter lands to pick up some guests at Shannon Wynne's Caddo Lake house. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

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There was applause, and a feast served buffet-style: crawfish and fried catfish and golden-brown hush puppies, and surely some delicious vegetables that I skipped. I popped open a non-alcoholic Athletic brew (Wynne, being sober himself, accommodated those of us who no longer drink), and I took in the view as the sun sank and a cool breeze trickled across my back. The deep history of the land, the light touch of the host, the casual cohabitation of art and nature, as though one didn't have to choose between country and city, wildlife and culture. I settled my feet on my companion's lap as he went to town on some crawfish, and our table started to fill with the crumpled napkins of our dining companions, the sign of a successful party.

Shortly before 7 p.m., a helicopter descended onto the lawn again. The mechanical beast hovered and skittered like a frustrated dragonfly, wind from the propeller blades rattling the tops of the cypress and oak trees like a monsoon was coming. David Bowie sang on the sound system. This was quite the exit, though both artist and host stuck around. No offense to the party over in Dallas, but the rest of us weren't ready to leave yet.



Shannon Wynne looks on as happy guests depart his Caddo Lake unveiling. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)



[Sarah Hepola](#), Staff Writer . Sarah Hepola is a features staff writer. She has more than 25 years of journalism experience including with the Dallas Observer, Austin Chronicle, Salon.com and Texas Monthly. She is the author of the 2015 best-selling memoir "Blackout" and was the host/creator of the Texas Monthly podcast "America's Girls," about the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders.

✉ sarah.hepola@dallasnews.com

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