

HYPERALLERGIC

News

Artist Drops 800-Pound Heroin Spoon Outside OxyContin Manufacturer's Headquarters

Artist Domenic Esposito and gallerist Fernando Luis Alvarez delivered the giant sculpture to the doorstep of drugmaker Purdue Pharma.

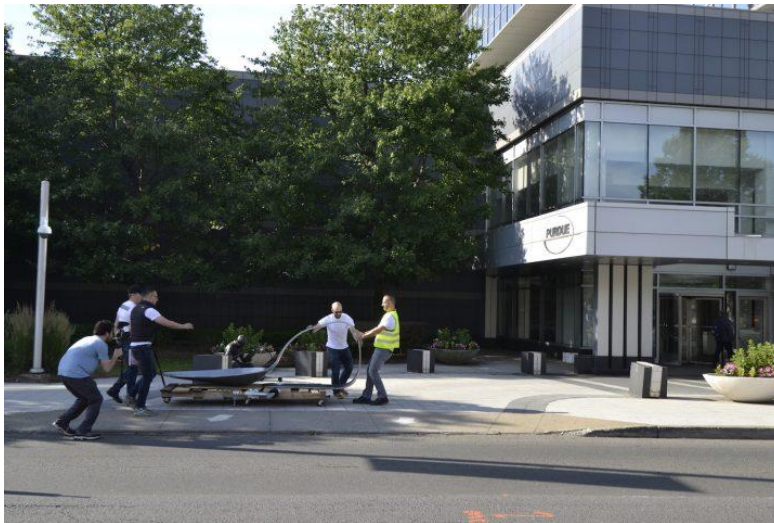
Sarah Rose Sharp June 26, 2018



Artist Domenic Esposito stands beside an 800-pound forged steel sculpture of a burnt heroin spoon, following a guerrilla installation outside the headquarters of Purdue Pharma, makers of OxyContin. (all images pulled from live footage of the intervention, courtesy of Fernando Luis Alvarez Gallery, unless indicated otherwise)

You wouldn't think that something as innocuous as a spoon could grow to take on gargantuan importance — unless, of course, you hold space in your life for someone who struggles with addiction. In that case, the presence of a spoon — specifically bent and burnt in a manner that accommodates the preparation of a dose — could become an 800-pound elephant in the room. On the morning of Friday, June 22, gallerist Fernando Luis Alvarez, whose eponymous gallery in Stamford, Connecticut mounted an exhibition on the opioid epidemic that opened that evening, delivered just such an elephant to the doorstep of Purdue Pharma, a major manufacturer of opioids, including OxyContin.

This blockbuster drug has made billions for Purdue, and the majority-shareholding members of Mortimer and Raymond Sackler's families. It is identified as a gateway drug for heroin use. According to a study by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (updated in March of this year), more than 115 people in the United States die daily after overdosing on opioids, and an estimated 80% of people who use heroin first misused prescription opioids.



Artist Domenic Esposito and gallerist Fernando Luis Alvarez deliver the former's spoon sculpture to Purdue Pharma's headquarters. (photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2018)

For Boston-based sculptor Domenic Esposito, the creation of this hand-forged steel sculpture and its installation in front of Purdue Pharma headquarters in Stamford was not an abstract political statement. He was inspired to make the work in response to the very personal experience of his brother Danny's struggle with heroin addiction.

"It's a struggle that a lot of families have endured — for us, it's been 14 years," he told *Hyperallergic* over the phone. "I don't wish it on anybody, it's been crazy."



Esposito (left) and Fernando Alvarez delivered a short spoken manifesto on the subject of the opioid crisis, before police were called to the scene.

"I wanted the sculpture to be big," he added. "This is the biggest epidemic the US has witnessed. Millions have been affected — not just the lives lost, but the people left behind because of addiction." According to Esposito, he has been flooded

with email and social media response to the work, most containing stories of personal tragedy. “I wanted the work to be massive, on the scale of the epidemic. And I wanted that Purdue sign in the background.”

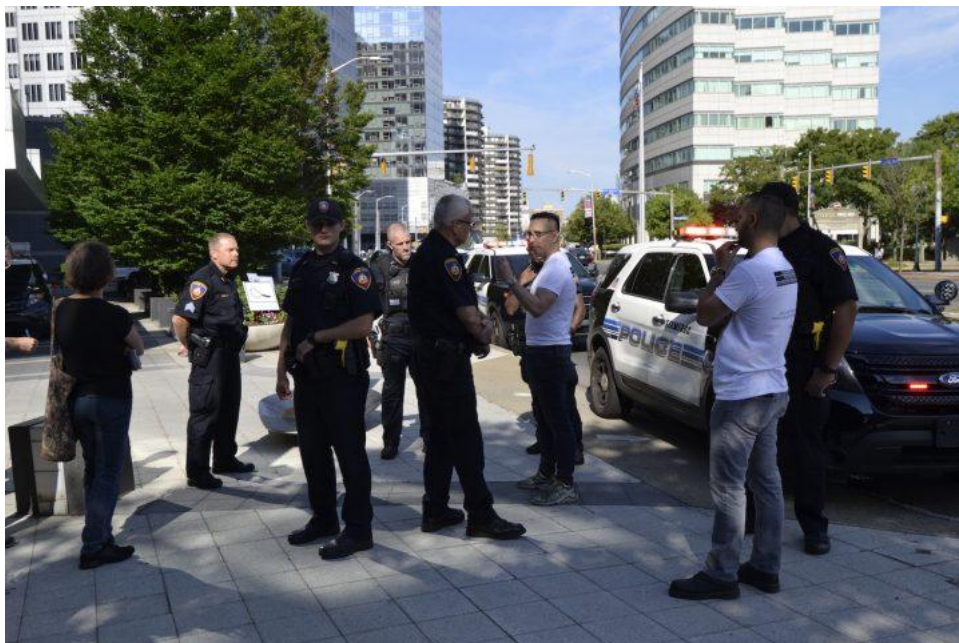
Alvarez and Esposito met several months ago and quickly found common ground on this issue, working together on the intervention at Purdue in exceedingly short order, considering the size of the work and the logistics involved. Though Alvarez does not claim personal acquaintance with anyone struggling with opioid abuse, he was strongly moved to create the exhibition based on the need for recognition of the actors that continue to facilitate distribution of gateway drugs like OxyContin, and a desire to see them held accountable in a meaningful way.



Domenic Esposito's spoon sculpture in the driveway of Purdue Pharma's headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut. (photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2018)

“This work is right in line with *Opioid: Express Yourself*, which provided artists a platform to hold accountable the architects of the opioid epidemic,” he said. “The model we came up with when I opened my gallery in 2009 was to build artists’ careers from the doors in and community from the doors out. We’ve done a lot of community work, but this is most ambitious one, and we lucked out that we found this incredible talent in Domenic.”

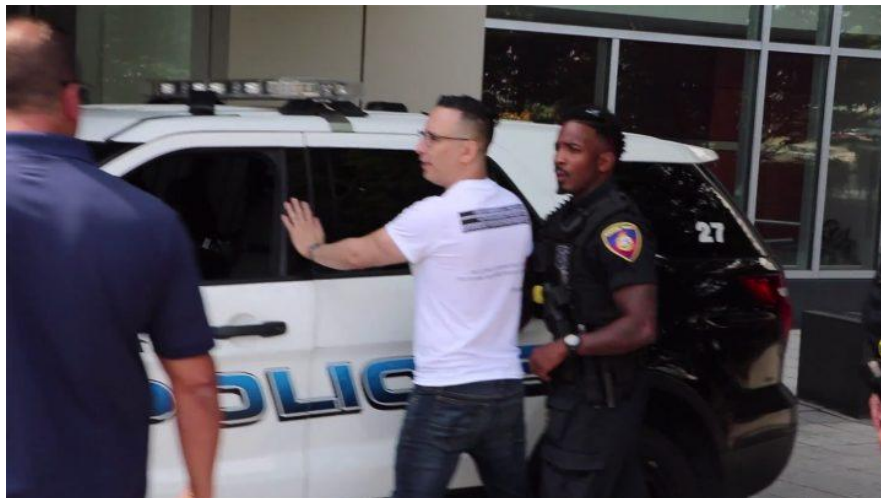
Alvarez was arrested during Friday’s intervention, which involved depositing the approximately 800-pound purpose-built sculpture directly in middle of the driveway at Purdue headquarters, impeding traffic into the building. The artist and the gallerist had no direct contact with anyone at the pharmaceutical company, but Alvarez spent nearly an hour negotiating politely with Stamford Police Department officers before being arrested on criminal misdemeanor and felony charges.



The Stamford Police Department talks to artist Domenic Esposito and gallerist Fernando Luis Alvarez (photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2018)

“They wanted me to move it, and I just wouldn’t,” said Alvarez. “But they are true professionals, and I must say they treated us very well. They understood what was going on, the importance of this, and they were kind of stuck in a difficult situation.” Presumably, police officers and other first responders are all too familiar with the collateral damage inflicted by OxyContin, heroin, and other opioids.

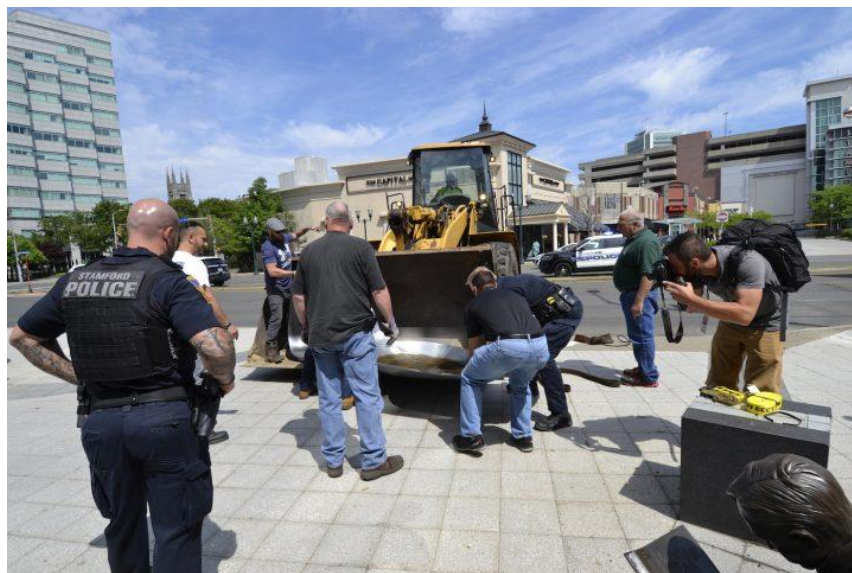
The sculpture was seized, and as of Monday evening, was still being held by police, though Esposito feels confident he will be able to retrieve his work once sufficient ownership documentation is produced. Though Alvarez anticipated the media blitz that has taken place in the wake of the intervention — and hinted that there is more to come on the subject — the pair emphasized that the work is a means to an end, which is the prosecution of conscious actors in the opioid crisis.



Alvarez was eventually arrested and charged with criminal and misdemeanor offenses after refusing to remove the sculpture, but was released from police custody before the end of the day on Friday. The sculpture remains in impound.

“It’s not about a fine, you know?” Alvarez said. “They get fines, and it’s a lot of money for the status quo, but for them it’s nothing, because they’re really benefitting two or three times that kind of money.” He referred to a \$600 million settlement paid by Perdue in 2007, following guilty pleas by three top executives on charges of criminal “misbranding” of the addictive effects of OxyContin.

“How many times can we trust them?” asked Esposito. “There were supposed to be some real changes, and nothing is really happening.” It was only as recently as February of this year that Perdue ceased all marketing activity connected with OxyContin, and the company announced the dismissal of the final sales force dedicated to promoting the addictive painkiller last week, more than 11 years after the record-setting settlement case. For Esposito and Alvarez, the stakes couldn’t be higher.



Stamford Police remove artist Domenic Esposito's spoon sculpture from the driveway of Purdue Pharma's headquarters. (photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2018)

“Epidemics like this take 25–50 years to develop — there’s history of that in America,” said Alvarez. “We have become the unhealthiest people in the world, with tobacco companies in the 1950s, the food industry in the ’70s, and now, since the ’90s, it’s pharmaceuticals. We need to put people behind bars. That is our objective.”

Additional works by Esposito are featured in the group exhibition [Opioid: Express Yourself](#), which continues at the Alvarez Gallery through July 30.