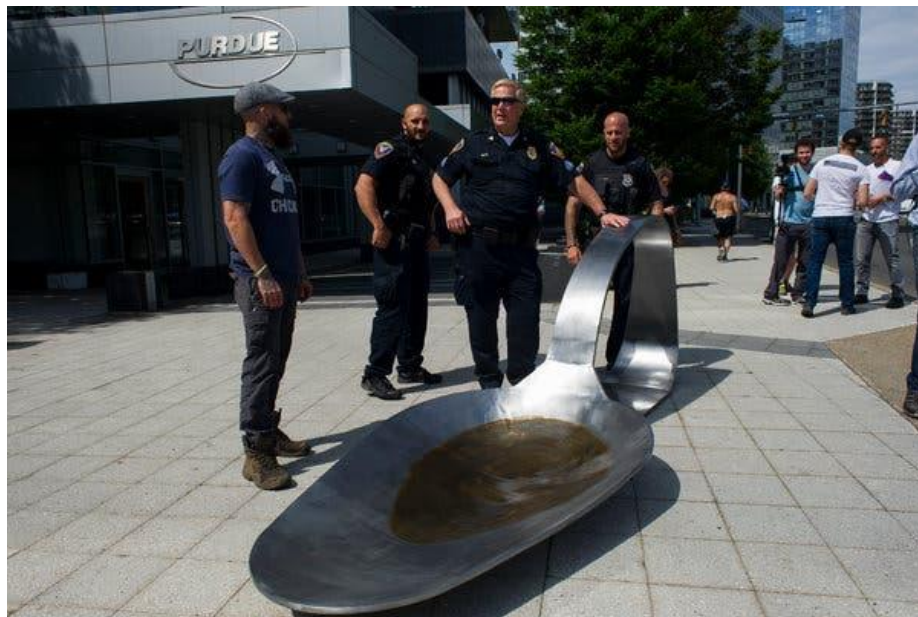


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Large-Scale Art Protest Outside OxyContin Maker Ends in Arrest



Police confiscated a large sculpture of a spoon that was placed outside Purdue Pharma headquarters in Stamford, Conn., as part of a protest against the opioid crisis. Gregg Vigliotti for The New York Times

By Colin Moynihan

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STAMFORD, Conn. — The sculpture, about 10 feet long and weighing some 700 pounds, is a huge depiction of the sort of spoon addicts use to cook heroin before injecting it.

On Friday morning, the spoon, by the Boston-based sculptor Domenic Esposito, was unloaded here outside the headquarters of Purdue Pharma, the makers of the painkiller OxyContin.

Some of Mr. Esposito's work exploring the ways that addiction affects lives will appear in a new exhibition at a gallery a few blocks away. He and the gallery owner, Fernando Luis Alvarez, said they were at Purdue to shame the company, asserting that its much-abused drug had led countless people to dependence and served as a gateway to other narcotics like heroin. "I think this is an important matter," Mr. Alvarez said. "People are dying."

As the opioid epidemic rages on, Purdue Pharma has become a magnet for criticism from legislators, regulators and the relatives of the dead. On Friday it was the artists' turn, however briefly. The spoon was gone by noon, carted off on the orders of the police. And the gallery owner was arrested and led away in handcuffs after he refused to move the piece from where it had been blocking Purdue's driveway.



An exhibition at the Fernando Luis Alvarez Gallery in Stamford is intended to draw attention to the problem of opioid addiction. Gregg Vigliotti for The New York Times

A statement Friday from a Purdue spokesman, Robert Josephson, said, "We share the protesters' concern about the opioid crisis and respect their right to peacefully express themselves."

Mr. Josephson said the company is committed to working on meaningful, collaborative solutions to help stop deaths related to opioid overdoses.

Over the past year, increasing attention has been directed at Purdue and the members of the Sackler family who owned and ran the company while it aggressively marketed OxyContin as a painkiller that was less prone to abuse than other drugs. In 2007, the parent company of Purdue pleaded guilty to a federal felony charge of misbranding OxyContin with the intent to defraud or mislead.

Multiple states have since sued the company, saying it employed deceptive marketing practices, an allegation Purdue has denied. The photographer Nan Goldin, who said that a prescription for OxyContin led her to addiction, has organized protests including one inside the Sackler Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which members of the family had supported with sizable donations. Other recent protests have taken place outside Purdue Pharma's building. Earlier this month two brothers from Pennsylvania used a projector to beam messages onto the building's facade, referring to the company as a "cartel," according to the Stamford Advocate.



Fernando Alvarez, a gallery owner in Stamford, was arrested when he refused to remove the spoon sculpture, which was blocking a Purdue Pharma driveway.
Gregg Vigliotti for The New York Times

Mr. Esposito said he spent about six weeks fashioning the spoon from steel. The idea, he said, was to reflect the experience of a relative who had begun using OxyContin and Percocet experimentally before turning to heroin.

The bent spoon became an emblem of the relative's struggles, Mr. Esposito said. The family would sometimes find similar implements around, disappointing discoveries at a time when they believed their loved one had been in recovery.

"And then all the pain started over," he said.

The addiction-related works in Mr. Alvarez's gallery are part of a show titled "Opioid: Express Yourself." They include an image of a giant white capsule with damaged ends depicted against a bright red background, and an abstract painting meant to project depression and anxiety. There is also a work that represents a section of bathroom wall that also includes pill bottles peeking from behind tiles affixed to the wood, and a medicine cabinet shaped like a tombstone.

As for the spoon, Mr. Alvarez, Mr. Esposito and a few friends towed it to the Purdue building around 8 a.m. on Friday in a trailer emblazoned with an image of a skull. The police arrived before long and over the next two hours officers negotiated with Mr. Alvarez, telling him "your giant spoon" has to go. Finally a commander issued Mr. Alvarez a ticket for "obstructing free passage." When he declined after that to remove the sculpture Mr. Alvarez was placed under arrest on a charge of "interfering with police," the commander said. He was detained briefly before being released.

Back at the building, a yellow front loader arrived. Several men wrestled the spoon into the shovel of the frontloader, and it was then hoisted up, placed onto the back of a truck and driven away.