

Arts & Culture

How Did A Giant Heroin Spoon Sculpture Land In Front Of Purdue Pharma's HQ?

Connecticut Public Radio | By Ray Hardman

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One morning last June, a giant sculpture of a heroin spoon was dropped on the campus of Purdue Pharma in Stamford. It was a piece of protest art meant to hold the pharmaceutical company responsible for its role in the opioid epidemic.

The incident led to the arrest of Stamford gallery owner Fernando Alvarez and the confiscation of the sculpture. The heroin spoon has since been returned to the Domenic Esposito, the artist who created it, and Alvarez is due in court on Monday facing charges related to the installation.

The story behind the giant heroin spoon began back in April of this year. Stamford's Fernando Luis Alvarez Gallery was working on a new exhibition, "Opioid: Express Yourself." It was as an artist-led project aimed at calling out entities Alvarez believes are complicit in the current opioid epidemic - namely the pharmaceutical companies who produce opioid painkillers and their army of lobbyists, lawmakers, and the doctors who overprescribe painkillers.

"I've been in waiting rooms in doctor's offices, and you see people sitting there like zombies," said gallery owner Fernando Alvarez, "they go in there, they get their prescription drugs and they walk out. How can doctors not see that? Doctors knew, Purdue Pharma and these other companies must have known, and our politicians were just turning a blind eye to it as they took money from them."

Alvarez said the project was coming along, but what he was looking for was an anchor - a big symbolic, work of art to tie the whole exhibition together. Through a college friend, he was introduced to Boston-based sculptor Domenic Esposito. He says he knew after five minutes of meeting Esposito that he had found his anchor.

"It was a no-brainer after hearing the story of his brother and what his family has gone through, for this to be the artist, the last artist to select for the exhibit," said Alvarez.

Domenic Esposito's brother had been struggling with addiction for years. He has been sober for almost a year now, but the years of rehab and relapse have taken it's toll on Esposito and his Italian immigrant family.

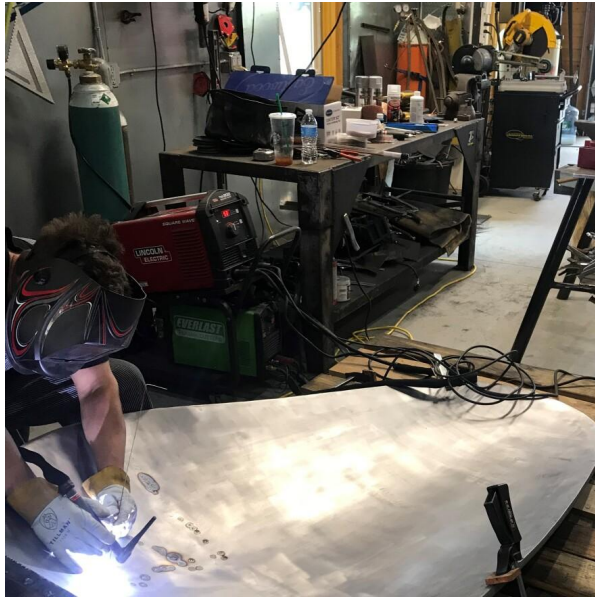
"My mom found a spoon in the house, and she called me in this crazy panic broken, saying 'I found another spoon' in broken English," said Esposito. "And so your hearts starts racing, and all the air gets sucked out of your lungs. The spoon for me is a dark sort of emotional symbol."

Esposito told Alvarez about his idea for an enormous heroin spoon sculpture, and Alvarez gave him the green light to start work on the spoon. So in late April, with only six weeks before the opening of the exhibition, Esposito began work on the massive project.

"It was very emotional, I mean I had my brother visit me every once in a while and be there with me," Esposito said. "It was a difficult process because you're

under this time constraint, but there's an emotional factor. It's really kind of a visceral feeling that I felt at that point constructing the spoon."

Esposito chose steel as his material for the heroin spoon.



Credit Domenic Esposito

Sculptor Domenic Esposito works on the bowl of his heroin spoon sculpture.

"The bowl of the spoon was made by using an English wheel, it's way of rolling metal so you get that curve, kind of like how they made bumpers on older cars," explained Esposito. "It's heavy. A lot of it is constructed of 1/8th inch steel; both sided, with a square tube as the skeleton. Long story short, it's about 10

feet in length, 19 feet if you rolled it out flat, and weighs about 800 pounds."

Esposito finished the spoon in mid-June. With the sculpture finished, he and Fernando Alvarez got to work planning the second part of this venture into guerilla art - figuring out the logistics of seamlessly dropping the sculpture in just the right spot on the campus of Purdue Pharma. They chose Purdue Pharma because the Stamford company's flagship drug, OxyContin, is the subject of lawsuits brought by many counties and municipalities who say the drug is responsible for fueling the opioid epidemic. Esposito said the secret to the perfect drop was precision, speed, and practice.

"We basically made this thing out of two pallets - we put them together, put wheels on 'em, and then rolled the spoon off the trailer and basically dumped it onto the sidewalk in front of Purdue Pharma."

They dropped the spoon exactly where they wanted it for the perfect photo op - on the sidewalk in front of the headquarters with the Purdue Pharma logo in the background. Soon after, Esposito says things started going crazy. The police were

not accustomed to dealing with a guerilla art situation, and with Alvarez and Esposito refusing to move the sculpture there were unsure how to proceed.

“It just kept escalating with the police. First, we just had a normal policeman on watch come up and try to get us to remove it, then the sergeant, then the captain, and then finally after an hour of negotiations it went all the way to the state Attorney General. So, at that point the police hauled it away with a front loader.”

Esposito said the police handled the situation professionally and respectfully. In the end, gallery owner Fernando Alvarez was arrested on two charges - obstruction of free passage, and interfering with police, both misdemeanors. Alvarez says it was all part of the plan, and he has no regrets.

“Absolutely none. None at all,” said Alvarez. “This is such an important mission. We needed this to be an easy way for people to remember the importance of accountability for the mass deaths that have happened.”

In a written statement to Connecticut Public Radio Purdue Pharma says “We share the protesters’ concern about the opioid crisis, and respect their right to peacefully express themselves. Purdue is committed to working collaboratively with those affected by this public health crisis on meaningful solutions to help stem the tide of opioid-related overdose deaths.”

Alvarez said he isn't buying it. He said for too long companies like Purdue Pharma have used money, lawyers, lobbyists and statements from its public relations department to avoid real consequences for their part in the opioid epidemic.

“People are coming together and getting organized, but we still need to move the needle,” said Alvarez. “We will not be victorious until these people are put behind bars. We just want justice for them. Put them in front of a judge; put them in front of a jury. That is what we want for these people -to be treated like the rest of Americans if they committed a crime. That's all.”

Last month a judge ordered the Stamford police to return the heroin spoon sculpture to Domenic Esposito. Fernando Alvarez will be in court on Monday where he is expected to receive accelerated rehabilitation.