

VISUAL ARTS

Mass. and Cass, cast in bronze and on canvas

For artist and activist Domenic Esposito, the ravages of the opioid epidemic are personal and political

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Artist Domenic Esposito knows Mass. and Cass. His younger brother Danny has gone missing there in the past.

The tent encampment at Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard has been ground zero for growing challenges with homelessness and opioid abuse in Boston. Mayor Michelle Wu said Tuesday her administration is on track to help people there find transitional housing by Jan. 12.

Esposito's paintings "Mass" and "Cass" are on view in "Vox Clamantis," his exhibition at the Piano Craft Gallery in Roxbury, just a few



blocks from Mass. and Cass. It depicts the intersection, cars streaking by people along the sidewalk next to their tents.

Danny, who is 33, has been battling an opioid addiction for more than a dozen years, a struggle that has affected the whole family.

"Some nights we'd go down there, and we couldn't find him," said Esposito, 51. "We'd be walking around there looking for him."

He gestured toward the paintings. "And so this is . . . it's trauma to me."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 500,000 people died of opioid overdoses between 1999 and



Domenic Esposito's "Marching" (above), "Assailable" (left), and "Mass" (below).

'We want to make sure those who are accountable are held accountable.'

DOMENIC ESPOSITO, artist whose brother has gone missing in the past at Mass. and Cass



DOMENIC ESPOSITO FINE ART PHOTOS

2019. The epidemic has become more visible in recent years in the wake of lawsuits against the Sackler family, whose company, Purdue Pharma, manufactures OxyContin, and television shows such as "Dopesick" and "The Pharmacist."

Esposito, who lives in Westwood, is best known for his Opioid Spoon series. In 2018 and 2019, he placed 10.5-foot-long sculptures at the entryways of pharmaceutical companies Johnson & Johnson in New Brunswick, N.J.; Purdue in Stamford, Conn.; and Rhodes Pharmaceuticals in Coventry, R.I., as well as at the Food and Drug Administration at the Department of Health and



LANS TURKOLAKIS/STAFF

For artist, opioid epidemic's personal, political

► ESPOSITO

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Human Services in Washington, D.C. "We want to make sure those who are accountable are held accountable," Esposito said. "There's a huge web."

His targets responded with careful rhetoric.

"They usually put out a statement. 'We have compassion for the victims,'" Esposito said. "It's the least they can do."

In 2019, the artist founded the nonprofit Opioid Spoon Project. According to its mission statement, the activist group's aim is "informing and educating the public about this unfolding tragedy and promoting awareness about the white-collar criminals whose greed and indifference brought it to life."

The Latin title "Vox Clamantis" reflects Esposito's efforts to hold the powerful accountable, said independent curator Diana Lada L'Henaff, who organized the show.

"Vox clamantis in deserto" means to voice a cry that no one hears," she said. "In a way, that is what Domenic is and

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DOMENIC ESPOSITO, artist and activist

who he is. Dropping the spoon is guerrilla art warfare — screaming at people that just don't hear."

Esposito's activism calls out Big Pharma and others in power. His paintings and sculptures embrace those who suffer.

"The art is really about raising awareness around the isolation and loneliness of substance use disorder," he said.

To that end, the show includes a programming slate of entertainment and panel discussions at the gallery aimed to inform, engage, and help people feel less alone. Hip-hop artist and activist Novv St. River will perform on Jan. 21. Poet Matt Ganem, CEO and founder of Aftermath Addiction Treatment Center, will appear on Jan. 22.

A figure in a hoodie recurs in "Vox Clamantis," head down, face hidden, shoulders slouched. He shows up in "Mass" and again in "Cass." Esposito has also cast him, life-size, in bronze.

"People come up to me and say, 'Oh, this is my son, this is my daughter,'" he said. "You see somebody on the street

DOMENIC ESPOSITO:

VOX CLAMANTIS

At Piano Craft Gallery, 793 Tremont St., through Jan. 30.
www.pianocraftgallery.com

like that, you're intimidated. That's the stigma that's around mental health. But they're human. They're suffering."

The labels for the show are on the floor, prompting viewers to take the same downcast stance as the hooded figure.

"It seemed important," said L'Henaff in a text, "that we share in the form those around who feel marginalized take, if for just a few seconds."

Viewers may relate. The artist does as he labors in the studio.

"The work is very heavy and time-consuming and actually taxing on your body," he said. "I sort of compare it to families that are going through real struggles, real pain."

"But," he is quick to add, "it's nothing compared to what a lot of these families go through."

The Boston native's "Unconditional," a hybrid painting/sculpture, features a faceless figure walking closer, then emerging from the picture plane in bronze.

"It's really kind of personal to me and my brother," said Esposito, who has spoken publicly about his family's struggle before. "Dealing with people who have substance use disorder, you don't know what to do. They're there in front of you, 'I need money for dinner.' 'Something happened, and I can't pay my rent.' And you pay the rent."

He continued, "You have to step back to see the full picture if you really want to help. Take a day to step back, take an hour. Take 10 minutes . . . That's been the best way for me and my family to deal with it, rather than react to every moment."

Danny continues to struggle with opioids, Esposito said. He's now living in a sober house outside of Boston. Their parents live in Brighton, where the artist grew up.

"The hardest part of dealing with [opioid addiction] is the parents and what they do," the artist said. With a grown child, he added, "there's no right or wrong answer. Maybe you kick him out of the house and he ODs two days later . . . or maybe you don't, and he ODs anyway in your bedroom."

"I think as a family, we're in a better place than we were five or six years ago in terms of our own mental health," he said.

Esposito sees widespread attitudes toward opioid addiction improving, too. "We've seen a real change in the empathy. What hasn't changed is government action," he said. "And that is incredibly frustrating."

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DOMENIC ESPOSITO/STAFF

"Unconditional" is a hybrid painting/sculpture by Domenic Esposito (top, pictured among some of his works in "Vox Clamantis" at Piano Craft Gallery).