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A GALLERY OWNER WAS ARRESTED AFTER LEAVING A 10-FOOT HEROIN SPOON SCULPTURE OUTSIDE
OXYCONTIN MAKER PURDUE PHARMA

A Gallery Owner Was Arrested After Leaving a 10-Foot Heroin Spoon Sculpture Outside OxyContin Maker Purdue Pharma

BY **JAMIE DUCHARME** JUNE 24, 2018 11:15 AM EDT

A Connecticut gallery owner was arrested after dropping a 10-foot-long sculpture of a heroin spoon in front of Purdue Pharma's headquarters on Friday — and he says he plans to “gift” more spoons to other drug companies, as well as to politicians and doctors.

Fernando Luis Alvarez, who owns Stamford's Fernando Luis Alvarez Gallery, was charged with a criminal misdemeanor and a felony after leaving the roughly 800-pound piece, which was hand-made by Boston-based artist Domenic Esposito, in Purdue's driveway and refusing to remove it, the *Hartford Courant* reports.

Alvarez told TIME that the stunt — which coincided with an opioid-related show at his gallery — was meant to send a message to Purdue Pharma and to hold the company accountable for what he says are its contributions to the country's opioid epidemic.

“The bigger picture, which both Domenic and I really clicked on, is the importance of creating awareness for the right type of accountability,” Alvarez says. “The justice department and the country has to start putting some of these people behind bars, because they go on and make a lot of money and then they pay a fine and so be it. That is just not the way it should be.”

Stamford-based Purdue Pharma, which makes the widely prescribed opioid painkiller OxyContin, has drawn scrutiny for its sales and marketing practices, which several lawsuits allege led to improper prescribing practices that have contributed to patient misuse. Purdue has denied these allegations, but the company stopped promoting the drug in February and announced on Wednesday that it would eliminate the remainder of its salesforce.

“We share the protesters’ concern about the opioid crisis, and respect their right to peacefully express themselves,” a Purdue representative said in a statement provided to TIME. “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.”

Placing the sculpture — which Esposito says would have been even bigger, had he not needed to transport it to Connecticut in his trailer — in front of Purdue’s headquarters was meant to underscore that many heroin users first get hooked on prescription painkillers, he says. Esposito’s brother, who has struggled with addiction for 14 years, is one such person.

The artist says he can remember his mother calling him, screaming, when she found burnt spoons in the house.

“The air gets basically sucked out of your body, because here you are all over again,” he says. “The spoon is a symbol of darkness. It brings back some negative emotions for me.”

The sculpture, he says, was a way to channel those feelings into something productive. And though the piece currently sits in a city impound lot after its removal and Alvarez’ arrest on Friday, the duo says they have big plans for its second act. (Alvarez is due in court on July 10; he says he expects to learn what will happen to the sculpture then.)

“We’re going to gift the spoon to cities that are suing pharmaceutical companies because of the opioid epidemic,” Esposito says.

Though a city hasn’t been picked yet, Esposito says he and Alvarez are “very impressed with Boston and the state of Massachusetts because they’ve taken a leadership role in naming [actors in the epidemic].” A lawsuit filed by the state’s attorney general on Tuesday is the first to explicitly name Purdue’s executives and directors.

Separately, Alvarez says he hopes to orchestrate more stunts like the one at Purdue, potentially leaving spoons made by Esposito at other drug companies’ headquarters or at the offices of politicians and doctors they view as complicit in the opioid epidemic.

“It will be dropped to the next company and the next company and the next company, and then the next level of actors,” Alvarez says. “We’re going to make sure that they get their gift from us.”

Alvarez adds that he’s not concerned about consequences associated with the protest, including the criminal charges he already faces.

“I’ll take the hit. I’ll take the charges. When I represent an artist, I’m all in,” he says. “I was just laser-sharp focused in seeing that sculpture there and making sure society and the media would actually get our movement going, with that spoon being a symbol of the true accountability and the true conversations we need to be having about this.”