

Functional Art on Empire Street: PVD Fest sculpture installation encourages socially distant viewing



“Bee Violet” is an outdoor art installation on PVD’s Empire Street that was created by Allison Newsome and Deborah Spears Moorehead. Its patented design, a symbolic metal fish combined with a growing vegetable garden, redefines what is possible aesthetically and environmentally with art.

“It was made on a wing and a prayer,” says Newsome, referencing the difficulties COVID-19 posed while creating this sculpture-and-garden set that contains a message of self-reflection and a call for change. The sculpture, along with two others commissioned as part of this year’s unfortunately cancelled PVD Fest, was installed this season.

Its engineering matters as much as its aesthetic allure. “Bee Violet” is frog green with a lily pad-shaped canopy on top. Its cylindrical body is embellished in fish repoussé with luscious fuchsia petals underneath. While the aluminum sculpture easily attracts the eye, its designed purpose is to attract water.

“I have two patents for ‘Bee Violet,’” Newsome says, “which is the most you can get for one thing. I have a utility patent for the rain chain and a design patent for the petals.” Here’s how it works: raindrops gather in the canopy and are funneled through the cylindrical body, the rain chain. The petals draw in more water at the base of the rain chain and what is collected gets stored inside the flowerpot base. “For 1 inch of rain, it holds 50 gallons of water,” says Newsome, who called this process “rain harvesting” and the structure a “rain keep.”

Highlighting the connection between New England's conservation efforts and its Native American ancestry, artist and painter Deborah Spears Moorehead drew illustrations from an Indigenous creation story, which Newsome translated into aluminum repoussé with help from her teacher in Thailand. "They were all so curious about the creation story. They wanted to know every detail," said Newsome about explaining the sculpture to her teacher's family.

The story involves Sky Woman, who sits on a tree branch in the universe and wonders what lies in the "puddle below." Caught up in her curiosity, she falls and animals (such as squirrels and frogs) try to stop her fall by creating various things until they create Earth to catch her.

A key detail in this story that is reflected in the sculpture is that Sky Woman is nine months pregnant. There is a garden next to the double-patented rainkeep where The Three Sisters — corn, beans and squash — grow, contained in a giant basket handwoven by Spears Moorehead. This trio traditionally planted together is a key part of sustainable farming and it starts with burying seeds in a soil mound that is the size of a nine-months pregnant belly.

In her sculpture, Newsome echoed the garden's tenderness for the earth. She used powerwash, an eco-friendly coloring for metal. Unlike most rain barrels sold at local hardware stores, Newsome's rainkeep is made from aluminum. "The rain barrels at the store are typically plastic," she says. "Even if they look like clay, that's actually just an epoxy. And this plastic wears down in the sun. You have to think about what will happen to them in 10 years."

The underlying message of "Bee Violet" is togetherness despite distances, and with plenty of space surrounding it, the piece empowers socially distanced viewers to carefully study its visual details, eco-engineering, story representations and ultimately, humanity.

View the installation at 444 Westminster Street through the fall. For more information on this and the other sculptures installed by PVDFest, go to pvdfest.com/public-art