

MAGAZINE

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# new haven

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## New Haven's COOLEST SINGLES

### ODE TO JOY

A New Haven poet  
rocks the inauguration

### ART BY THE MILE

In Madison, sculpture  
for everyone

### ONE2ONE

Architectural titan  
César Pelli

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# Takin' It to the Street

*Madison's provocative, surprising Sculpture Mile sets new standard for 'public' art*

*The Sculpture Mile, outdoor public sculpture exhibition, Madison Center. 'Refreshed' annually. Curated by the Hollycroft Foundation. Free.*

A murder of crows flew up around me, startled by the fire department siren, as I began the Madison Sculpture Mile on a crisp winter morning. As its name suggests, the Sculpture Mile includes some 40 outdoor sculptures by different living artists set within walking distance throughout the center of Madison. It stretches from the Boston Post Road/Route 79 intersection at the west end of town (the fire department end), wanders back through the shopping mall behind Main Street, resurfaces on the Boston Post Road at the library, and continues east as far as Scotland Avenue. It's a pleasant walk, a very manageable stroll, there's no sense of either "Is *that* all there is?" or, alternately, "How much more of this is there?" Madison has been hosting this exhibition for some years now, it is the first of its kind in the country and the length is just right.

The larger works — the ones that are impossible to miss — are prominently displayed on the roadside grass verges along the route, and can easily be viewed from a passing car. The majority of pieces, however, are concentrated on the redbrick walkway that begins alongside the Wine Shop on Main Street and continues through to Scranton Park.

The selection of works is broad and inclusive. There are traditional figures on pedestals, abstract wood constructions, semi-figurative works, heavy steel industrial-like fabrications, small animals in the bushes, a ceramic pole — whimsical ideas and ponderous aesthetics.

Public sculpture is the unabashed exhibitionist of the arts. Painting and other graphic works are usually tucked away in galleries and museums where they

Eight-foot painted steel sculpture, 'Tres Gatos,' by Old Lyme's Gill Boro.





'Contortionist' in bronze and marble by New Jersey sculptor Mary Ellen Scherl.

have to be sorted out and appreciated in conditions of their own choosing. One has to be of a mind to go there and confront art, and the works themselves are able to frame their arguments in well-lit, quiet, contemplative surroundings. Public sculpture, on the other hand, is out there 24/7 waiting to surprise you — through all kinds of weather, enduring abuse from crows and their friends, and traffic and sirens and delinquent dogs and a few malcontents out for a little vandalism (though Madison has been remarkably free of it).

"Sculpture is what you bump into when you back up to look at a painting," quipped Abstract Expressionist painter Ad Reinhardt. Encountering outdoor sculpture, even when you are prepared for it, is different from gallery-going. You may well be thinking of something else entirely, the groceries or getting to the bank, when the work surprises you. And there's the difference: Sculpture is part of the real world. It is three-dimensional, has weight and mass and is made of wood, stone or metal — some knowable material. It is not *describing* something; it is what it is. You can rap it with your knuckles, slide your fingers over it, feel a sharp edge or a soft curve, how hot or cold it is. It is a far more interactive object than a painting. You can walk around it, and when you do it changes. What's behind it changes, too.

What outdoor sculpture does, whether you like the particular work or not, is draw attention to *where* it is. The tree behind it, the yellow jeep parking alongside, the snow on top of it, the old man talking to himself about it. They are all part of the experience of the work. Sometimes the work is in direct contrast to its location (sharp-edged stainless steel amid the foliage); others blend into their environment so well you might miss them.

Outdoor sculpture heightens our awareness of our surroundings. It makes us pause, if only briefly, to consider other things — the ladder leaned against the wall, the carefully wrapped fire hose, the delivery man stacking crates by the store. It makes us think of how things are put together, of gravity and balance and context. It shows us the ingenuity of man in relation to materials.

Some people still carry a grudge against abstract art, as though its entire purpose is to mock the viewer. There's no great trick to it. Think of the rock 'n' roll our parents said was nothing but noise. All the sculptor is doing is offering a set of circumstances for your consideration.



Think about it, and if you still think it's a bunch of hooey then, at least, the act of contemplation alone was something of value. And it's hardly just a fad; abstract art has been around way too long for that.

So long, in fact, that there is already an academy of the new, where certain themes and forms have been repeated so often that they have quickly become as worn and tired as yesterday's pop song. And there is some Old School figurative sculpture — once reserved for generals on horseback

— which now seems fun and refreshing having been out of sight for a while.

Fun is important. If art is to teach us anything it must engage us first, provoke curiosity or some sense of wonder. And with 40 works on view there is broad appeal. One piece in particular appealed to me: Mary Ellen Scherl's "Contortionist." It made me laugh out loud. I imagined the artist with a smile on her face every day she worked on the sculpture. But no matter your taste, rest assured the

organizers have taken the New England weather approach: If you don't like this one just walk on a few steps and there'll be something completely different.

The Sculpture Mile is selected and organized by the Hollycroft Foundation, and supported by local businesses and donors. From May through October, 45-minute docent-led tours begin at 11 a.m. each Saturday at the Scranton Park Pavilion in the Stop & Shop parking lot.



Elaine Godowsky's 'Ramblin' Roses' leads a parade of six sculptures in Madison's Scranton Park.



Prix de Rome winner Anthony Padovano created this marble portrait of mythical 'Narcissus.'