

Carlisle sculptor Beth Galston awarded Nashville commission



Sculptor and Carlisle resident Beth Galston stands with her environmental piece "Luminous Garden Aerial," a part of her "Luminous Garden" series. This sculpture, inspired by her underwater exploration in the Galapagos Islands, features cast resin acorn caps topped with yellow lights and is meant to be seen from inside the structure as well as outside. (Courtesy photo)

by Cynthia Sorn

Carlisle sculptor Beth Galston has won a coveted art commission for her environmental piece "Sound Wave," which will be installed this month in the newly constructed Nashville's Music City Center. Competing against artists from around the country, Galston was just one of seven chosen to fill the building's public spaces with innovative new pieces. Galston's recent success reflects the growing public awareness of her interactive and inviting art form. In January her piece, "Sycamore Wall," was featured on the cover of Artscape magazine. One of her delightful "Luminous Garden" sculptures will be part of the spring exhibit, "Connectivity," at the McColl Center for Visual Arts in Charlotte, North Carolina. This year she was awarded a Massachusetts Cultural Council Artist Fellowship in Sculpture/Installation, enabling her to develop a new "Luminous Garden" installation with computer-controlled lighting.

Chatting at Ferns Country Store one morning last month, Galston explained the inspiration for her Nashville sculpture. She said the design of Nashville's Music City Center includes motifs of a guitar. "My piece will be in the curve of the guitar," she said. Galston's sculpture, "Sound Wave," consists of four sections of five gracefully undulating pipes, each representing the five lines of a musical staff. Glowing round elements with embedded LED lights are attached to the pipes. The computer-controlled lights twinkle on and off, giving a visual feel of a lively piece of music. The massive Music City Center is the newest convention hall in the heart of Nashville, adjacent to both the Bridgestone Arena and the Country Music Hall of Fame. Thousands will be viewing her sculpture each year.

Ideas can push material limits

Galston's sculptures fill space with

elements that shimmer, move, and flow. Many of her works do not feel static but give an impression of fluidity and are meant to draw in the viewer in the space. Developing her work "is a creative process," she said. "The ideas evolve through design and change." She works closely with fellow artist Bartek Konieczny, a fabricator who works out of Boston. Sometimes their visions are so new and different they challenge materials manufacturers. Together they have created many pieces, including an unusual and graceful chain link fence structure for a park in Jamaica Plain, called "Serpentine Fence," one of her public art commissions. Using chain link fencing to create a prototype in their studios, the team developed a unique curving structure that is designed to follow the serpentine landscaped paths. To have it manufactured they contacted 15 fence distributors. "They were not sure it could be done," said Galston. Using a computer design system that helped calculate the angles and heights, they were able to prove in their studio that the fence was workable, and it was installed in 2010.

"Sound Wave" - from concept to installation

Applying for a public art commission is time-consuming. Galston said from the submission of the application, which involves a huge amount of upfront work and supplying numerous supportive materials, to the final installation it can take more than two years. During the application process she, along with other artists, was invited to visit Nashville to meet the architect and view the installation sites. After she submitted her proposal, many months went by before she was invited back as a finalist. Along with one other artist, she was being considered for one specific installation spot in the Music Center. She brought her concepts

and drawings of her ideas, but she said she was surprised and a bit concerned when she saw the other artist had a huge box with a prototype. She didn't bring a model and so wasn't sure she was going to be awarded the commission. After about three weeks she received a call asking for more information and a model. The sponsors let her know they wanted to change the placement of the art, hoping to have it reach into the walking space in the building, a change that pleased her. "Bartek and I clicked into gear," she said. They created a miniature four-inch scale model of "Sound Wave." But they struggled with how to ship the delicate, suspended sculpture in a way to prevent the strings from tangling (a good example of how small details for a public commission can be diverting from the overall creative process). She said her husband, Jerry Lerman, who is the chair of the Carlisle Finance Committee, helped build a wooden crate which kept the strings from being tangled. "I am careful not to ask him to help too much, but it helps if he wants to," she said.

Hurry up and wait, then hurry up

Asked what the response was from Nashville, Galston said, "I didn't hear for several months, then the call came out of the blue." By then she was involved

lighting board in the area of the center. She designed the various light sequences using the software tool LightFactory and the sequence is loaded onto a DMX based controller device. "We won't be able to test the lights until we are there," explained Galston. Installation of her sculpture should be completed around April 17.

Public versus private art

Galston said there are two parts to her art, public and private. Applying and receiving a commission for public spaces involves a lot of administrative time, she explained. "There's emailing, waiting for approvals... it diverts creativity into a different direction." Still, she is very good at public art, which shows in her constant commissions. Ideally, she said, she would like to pull her public and private art closer together. She has private clients, and can adapt her public art to fit smaller spaces. Recently she had a strong and moving experience during a trip to the Galapagos Islands, and would like to create an underwater garden element to add to her "Luminous Garden" collection. "I'd like cross-fertilization between public and private pieces," she said. She is excited about using the computer software in other projects. "I am thinking about fireflies," she said, explaining



Beth Galston attaches a light element on one of the bars of her "Sound Wave" structure. (Courtesy photo)

in another public commission. "It's Murphy's Law," she said. "Spreading out the commissions would be ideal, but projects can be on hold for six months and then come right away." The project was completed this spring. "Bartek and two of his helpers completed the metal fabrication," she said. Installation is another time-demanding part of the project, involving meetings, safety training and coordinating with the workers on the site. Bartek and his assistants will be driving the sculpture down, and she will be meeting them there. One of the aspects that worries her is the coordination of the light elements, which have to be connected to the

that the delicate nature of their lights intrigues her. Much of her inspiration is drawn from nature, and in many of her pieces she uses natural materials. In one of her installations, "Suspended," she strung acorn caps into a fantastically long chain. She can sculpt with a vast array of materials: she has pieces created entirely out of toothpicks. In 2003, using suspended birch and beech trees, her structure, "Apokalypsis," was used in a performance by Prometheus Dance Company.

The commissions during the last year "all pulled me out of my private studio," said Galston. However, it is clear that her creative process hasn't suffered and her public art will continue to enthrall visitors, whether in Nashville, or right here in Massachusetts.

Galston's art can be viewed at www.bethgalston.com. For more information on Konieczny's work see www.solutionsinmetal.com. Δ