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# Elmhurst's new addition to public art is dynamic stainless steel sculpture with an homage to original member of Hairy Who

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Chicago-based artist Nicole Beck created "Portal," a dynamic sculpture with an O-shaped armature and glass that

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FEEDBACK

Two years ago, Chicago based artist Nicole Beck started work on a sculpture commissioned by the City of Elmhurst as part of the current art commission's first public art piece. On Sept. 17, the town and its members will celebrate the stainless steel masterpiece, titled "Portal" in all its mirrored glory.

The sculpture is up and ready for viewing, atop a sentimental plinth of stone, but the work that went into it was significant — an aspect often overlooked, said sculptor Beck.

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“It’s a massive project. A lot of labor and a lot of love,” she said. “It took two years to execute, and then three and a half days to install the glass on-site . . . a whole day to get the stone there.”

The two-toned light reflective glass panels provide a spectrum of color that fluctuates radically based on the viewer’s vantage point and outdoor light

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The Public Art Commission of Elmhurst was formed three years ago with nine appointed art commissioners, working on a volunteer basis, including John McKinnon, Executive Director of the Elmhurst Art Museum.

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According to city officials, the role of the Art Commission is “to implement a citywide plan for the promotion and thoughtful placement of public art that includes, but is not limited to, sculptures, murals, and paintings, in an effort to improve the business climate and aesthetic appeal of the City of Elmhurst.”

“What ended up happening was we said, ‘OK, we have a site, we have funds, let’s put out an open call,’” McKinnon said. “We’re hoping to revitalize the area and bring conversations to the forefront.”

The excitement from the commission was apparent to Beck, who said members of the commission would stop by to chat while she was installing the glass on site. Beck learned that a woman named Suellen Rocca, an original member of the Hairy Who, was on the commission.

Rocca and five other Chicago artists came up together in the 60s to form a short-

“She (Rocca) was very adamant that a stone plinth be used for the structure to elevate it into space, but that wasn’t included in the budget so I had to work with the village to get that done and then there was a guy that owned a construction firm in Elmhurst who donated it,” Beck explained. “That might be a geeky art fact, but Suellen, one of the original Harry Whos, how cool is that!”

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Sadly, Rocca died in 2020 before the sculpture was completed, but Beck said the stone holding “Portal” up is a “tip of the hat and an homage to her legacy.”

Most of Beck’s art is inspired by systems found in nature and science, something as intricate as the custom laminated dichroic glass that makes up the sculpture.

“It’s specifically a diamond torus, representing the formation of energy, actually,” Beck said. “The structure is apparent in everything from the structure of the universe to hurricanes, to plants and the human body.”

It’s no coincidence that Beck’s art heads in this direction — she was in pharmacy school at Purdue University before transferring to the School of the Art Institute for a master’s in fine arts.

“I circled back to art-making after going through all of those hoops,” Beck said. “I call myself an environmental activist . . . I’m an organic gardener and just fascinated by things like quantum physics. I guess you could say all my artwork is embedded in science, be it botanical or astronomical or basic physics.”

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Beck was really driven to the concepts intimately when she did a \$250,000 commission for the University of Illinois College of Electrical and Computer Engineering in 2014.

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“But when you’re commissioned for a piece for a public municipality like Elmhurst, you have to consider more universal themes and so it just gets paired down to an abstract shape that probably has more significance to me than anyone else,” Beck said. “You know people are just entranced by it because it’s a cool shape and it’s got this fabulous glass.”

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Chicago-based artist Nicole Beck working to install custom laminated dichroic glass on her public art sculpture in

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For those that are interested in unwrapping the inspiration behind the piece, the Elmhurst Art Museum worked with Beck to create an audio piece to accompany the sculpture.

“There is a very brief, one paragraph description on a label with a QR code that links you to an audio clip of the artist explaining her work,” McKinnon said. “We felt like we had something to add in terms of interpretation and we’ve been doing a lot of audio guides lately at the museum.”

“Portal” is located in a central spot frequently visited by dog walkers and casual strollers in the nexus of downtown Elmhurst, just a stone’s throw from the Elmhurst Metra Station and nearby Elmhurst University, the library and Elmhurst Art Museum.

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While Beck was putting up each individual piece of glass, she noted there were a couple hundred people filtering through the area, stopping to see the work in progress.





Chicago-based artist Nicole Beck created "Portal", a dynamic sculpture with an O-shaped armature and glass that changes color under certain conditions. (Nicole Beck)

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“Elmhurst is great,” she added. “It’s kind of nestled in there and you don’t know about it until you do.”

Beck will be at the “Portal” Sculpture Celebration, *N. Larch Park, Elmhurst (west of The Marke at 100 N. Addison)*, on Friday, Sept. 17, from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. along with the mayor and art commissioners. The event is open to all.

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