

Sculptor relies on color in her abstract metal works

The sculptor Andree Valley is used to surprises. Her art-making process often takes unexpected turns — and she likes it that way.



Andree Valley creates artwork in the studio in her West Side Madison home. Last November she finally got to see her outdoor sculpture "Triffid V" on display in Italy in the prestigious Venice Biennale.

JOHN HART, STATE JOURNAL

But in 2019, when the artist started getting emails out of the blue saying that she'd been selected to participate in a prestigious international exhibition in Europe, "I thought it was a scam," she said. "I kept deleting the emails."

The emails turned out to be legitimate. Valley, who works out of a studio in the converted garage of her home on Madison's Far West Side, was asked by the European Cultural Center to exhibit a work in the 2021 Venice Architecture Biennale "Time Space Existence."

Her nearly 8-foot-high colorful aluminum sculpture — titled "Triffid V" after the iconic 1951 science fiction novel "The Day of the Triffids" by John Wyndham — found a spot in the Giardini Marinaressa, a public park near the Arsenale di Venezia in Venice, Italy, where it will remain until late this fall.

Wyndham's novel is about rogue plants who expose "the frailty of human existence," said Valley, 73, but when it comes to her brightly colorful sculptures, "mine are optimistic." In its outdoor setting, "Triffid V" moves in the wind, "with the dynamic sensibility of a living plant."

Valley grew up south of Boston and, instead of following her father's wishes that she attend an East Coast college, moved West and went to the University of Denver. She later earned an MFA at the University of Michigan.

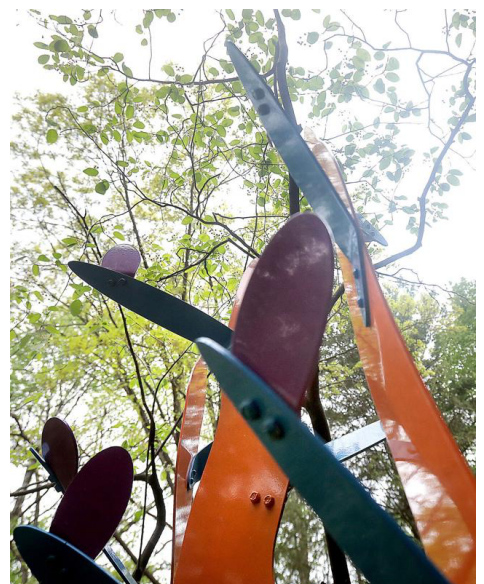
Initially a math major, Valley soon found that ceramics were her calling. After earning her undergraduate degree, she spent two years as a resident artist at the Archie Bray Foundation, an international creative center dedicated to the ceramic arts in Helena, Montana.

In 1983, Valley and her husband, John, the Charles R. Van Hise professor emeritus of geology at UW-Madison, moved to Madison, where they raised their two sons, now scientists in London and Minneapolis. Valley taught ceramics at Madison Area Technical College for close to 20 years. Her metal sculptures, rendered in vibrant hues, can be



Andree Valley works on an aluminum sculpture in her studio. The Madison artist was invited by the European Culture Center to participate in the 2021 Venice Architecture Biennale "Time Space Existence."

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Andree Valley originally worked in ceramics, but now primarily creates sculptures in metal, such as this one outside her Madison home.

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found throughout the city in places such as the UW Health West clinic lobby on Junction Road and in the UW-Madison Physics Department in Chamberlin Hall.

The opening for the Venice Architecture Biennale originally was scheduled for May 2020, but was pushed back a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Valley finally got to visit Venice to see “Triffid V” on site last November.

She was asked to keep the sculpture in place for the 2022 Venice Art Biennale, too, and was invited to attend the opening for that show this April — but she got COVID right before her trip, despite two booster shots and “even though I was being so careful,” she said. She’s now fully recovered and back in the studio.

Being selected for the Venice Biennale must have been a thrill.

It was exciting. I couldn’t believe that they found me. And I am delighted — because as an artist, it’s hard to get recognition. And I’m terrible at working at it.

How did you first move from ceramics to metal sculpture?

We moved to Houston, Texas, (in 1980) where John had a job at Rice (University). I had a job at the Jewish Community Center teaching ceramics and worked for a local arts council — and had a baby. And clay is



Measuring nearly 8 feet tall, Andree Valley's "Triffid V" is on display in the Giardini Marinaressa, a public park near the Arsenale di Venezia in Venice, Italy.

ANDREE VALLEY

not really patient. It dries out. So it's kind of a struggle when you can't work with it every day.

So I just started working in aluminum in the studio I set up in our garage. I like aluminum. It's light. It's bendable. It takes color beautifully. It doesn't rust. It has a lot of advantages.

Talk about the “randomness” of your sculptures.

My work tends to be abstract, and I try not to use specific orientation in my work. Even with my wall pieces, they can be flipped or displayed on their side. I don't want an up or down. I'm always thinking about something spontaneous; I'm thinking about orientation and flip-ability, because I don't want them to sit in one way.

I love color. Color excites me. I have a series called “Piles,” envisioning piles in a sort of fun, abstract way. And one of the things I want to do more of in the future is to use sound. I'd like work with contact mics on the pieces — there are contact mics that engineers use to see how buildings are vibrating — and have it so that you can walk by (a sculpture) and hear the piece vibrating.

Do the finished pieces evolve from your initial designs for them?



Artworks by Madison artist Andree Valley fill her home — including her basement, where she both photographs and stores some of the "library" of colorful, multi-shaped metal pieces she incorporates into her work.

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Oh, totally. I don't have anything pre-prescribed at the beginning. I have just an idea of what I want (in terms of) scale, color, and how I want it to work.

You've also designed anniversary exhibitions for the Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestras (WYSO) and the Pro Arte Quartet at the Dane County Regional Airport, designed a book cover for composer John Harbison and created a sculpture with composer Nathaniel Bartlett that was shown at the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery. Is music an inspiration for your work?

It always has been. I'm on the (WYSO) board, and my kids were in the youth orchestra.

What's next for you?

Right now I'm working on a series of smaller pieces, and I'd like to get a show in the next year or two with that. And I will make a piece for outside the youth orchestra's new building (planned for the 1100 block of East Washington Avenue) and donate that. It'll be 10 feet high or so — not huge, but not small. It'll be made out of steel rather than aluminum. And it will be colorful.