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## Wild blue yonder

Two artists invoke the sky above us in works recently installed at airport

By Amy Griffin

Published 5:57 pm, Tuesday, December 30, 2014

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L to R: Sharon Bates, Nick Warne and Roberley Bell installing "Chasing the Sky." Photo by Amy Griffin. ()



On a recent Wednesday morning, as the holiday travel season was getting into full swing, the [Albany International Airport](#) was the destination for artist [Roberley Bell](#). She was installing the latest site-specific installation in this art-filled airport.

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There are two art galleries and at any given time about seven public art installations throughout the concourses, as well as four large sculptures. Artists interested in exhibiting at the airport are invited to submit proposals, which are reviewed by [Sharon Bates](#), director of the art and culture program, her assistant, [Kathy Greenwood](#), and others.

Bates says the process is organic. "We try to find works that are compatible with each other to some degree," says Bates. "Sometimes a piece will stay up longer than expected, because we'd rather keep it up than have a vacant space."

There are two or three new projects a year, and two recent additions have just been installed. In addition to Bell's piece, called "Chasing the Sky," in Concourse B, there's also a new piece over the downstairs ticketing area by [Derek Parker](#) called "Sometimes I Forget That the Sky Starts at the Ground." From the titles, it's clear these artists give a lot of thought to the context in which their works will be seen. Public artworks like these require a different approach than art made to be shown in galleries.

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"You have a client. The client is the public, and you owe them something. You enter into a reciprocal relationship here," says Bell.

For her piece, she chose one of the ceiling wells in the concourse. There are several of these circular openings in the ceiling of the hallway concourse, not skylights but with reflected light from windows above the wells.

"I'm fascinated with these ceiling wells, because it's architecture that you're not aware of until you're right underneath them. I like the surprise element and I thought that, in an airport, it should be really playful," Bell says.

Her piece was inspired by a bead maze toy for kids that she saw while stranded in an airport in Chicago. "That kind of playful notion really stayed with me," says Bell. Pink, green and orange conduit snakes across the span of the ceiling well. Seuss-like brightly colored blobs seem to dance on twisting rods. Says the artist, "I'd say color is the dominant aspect of the work that I do, and I'm also involved with these forms that are really hybrids of 20th-century biomorphism and blog design, so these are somewhere between the two."

Directly underneath the well is an orange-and-blue form that Bell calls a bench. Sprouting up from it is a faux palm plant. Travelers are invited to have a seat. "It'll be obvious that it's a sculpted seat," Bell says. Greenwood says that, unlike in the gallery, where sometimes artwork



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is to be looked at but not touched, in the public space, they take a different approach. "People's instinct here is to interact and so, here in the terminal, we try to make it so people can."

Bell often incorporates seating into her public works. "I feel like seating becomes the invitation to engage. It really is that kind of participatory language — to have a seat. And I try to make my seating devices so that they hold more than one person so it's also about conversation and encounters where you're suddenly sitting with someone else and you start talking about something." In this case, the seating is also an important device, because it signals to people to look up.

One challenge with public art is meeting code restrictions. Both new pieces, Bell's and Derek Parker's, were required to pass rigorous inspections. These aren't things artists typically have to be aware of when making their work.

Both artists had to ensure their works were coated in flame retardant. In the case of Parker's elegant piece, which involves strips of nylon seat belt webbing hanging from the ceiling, the placement was, in part, dictated by the locations of the smoke detectors and sprinklers. "With all of the logistics and regulations, we've learned that we have to tell artists ahead of time. So many things came up with this project, but Derek was not ruffled at all by it."

For Bell's part, those challenging logistics are all part of the process. "I find it really rewarding to work in the public realm," says Bell, "to take the work out of the gallery, which, for better or worse, is a very specific audience. So it's both a challenge and a reward for an artist. But it's not for everyone."

*Amy Griffin is a frequent contributor to The Times Union. You can reach her at amygriffin@gmail.com.*

**If you go**

**Where:** Albany International Airport

**When:** Ongoing; 7 to 11 p.m. daily

**Admission:** Free

**Info:** 242-2241

**Note:** Some artworks, such as Roberly Bell's piece, can only be seen by ticketed passengers, but there is plenty of art on view before the security gate, including Derek Parker's piece over the ticketing counters on the ground floor and the nighttime train photography of William Gill upstairs in the Annex gallery, just inside the terminal near the pedestrian bridge.



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