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Like Christo, Thinking Big



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Kristin Jones has plans for the Hangman's Elm. [More Photos »](#)

By ROBIN FINN

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THE artist [Kristin Jones](#), 55, wrapped in a double layer of green velvet capes with her blond Rapunzel braid askew over one shoulder, stood in the northwest corner of Washington Square Park gazing rapturously at a 330-year-old tree known as the Hangman's Elm. She placed a protective hand on its mighty trunk.

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Then she whipped off her blue-rimmed glasses and, conducting the conversation with her ungloved hands, described her plans for that tree and four others in New York City: a 24-hour multimedia extravaganza of lighting, time-lapse filming, poetry and music, to be called "Behold."

Ms. Jones wants New Yorkers not only to appreciate the ancient giants in their midst but also to pitch in and help conserve them. In that respect, "Behold" is an artistic intervention.

"Imagine how beautiful she would be all lit up," she mused, stepping back from the English elm, one of just a few of its vintage left in the city. Ms. Jones assigned it a gender based on, well, women's intuition. Her intended subject dwarfs her, but then, all of her artistic ambitions are supersize.

The artist Kristin Jones, who has returned to New York after a decade in Rome, is planning a public art event called "Behold," which will highlight five great trees in New York. She isn't certain which trees from the boroughs outside Manhattan will be co-starring in the event, but she decided on Manhattan's representative almost instantly. It is the "Hangman's Elm," a 330-year-old denizen of Washington Square Park. "All these years this beautiful tree was right under my nose," she said. "It makes me angry that I never appreciated it until now."



Ms. Jones and her collaborator, Andrew Ginzel, envisioned the "Metronome" installation at One Union Square South in 1999 as an in-your-face gateway to downtown as well as a post-modern take on a glockenspiel/hourglass. Steam billowing from a gilt-edged void is one way of marking the passage of time. The Related Companies, which owns the building, recently spent about \$75,000 to recalibrate the digital clock.

Credit: Ty Cacek/The New York Times



Ms. Jones sketched the ancient she-wolves of Rome, and enlarged her favorites into stencils. With help from Rome's sanitation department, she spent a week washing the grime and graffiti off the travertine walls that border the Tiber River and left huge she-wolves in their place.

Credit: Mimmo Capone

If “Behold” comes to fruition, it will be Ms. Jones’s first major public art project in New York City since “Metronome,” the nine-story, 500-ton, \$4.2 million, steam-spouting installation at 1 Union Square South that she and [Andrew Ginzel](#), then her partner in life and art, unveiled 12 years ago. That artwork/digital timepiece, intended as a modernist meditation on the dissolution of time, was met with scathing reaction. Herbert Muschamp, then The New York Times’s architecture critic, called it “pretentious” and dismissed it as part of an [“unhappy consortium of art, architecture and real estate development.”](#)

The fiasco unfolded as Ms. Jones’s marriage to Mr. Ginzel was breaking up, and it temporarily curtailed their artistic partnership. Her escape route: a Fulbright grant to live and work in Rome.

Her mantra, based on advice she received from her mentors [Christo](#) and [Jeanne-Claude](#) before her departure: “Never ever ever take no for an answer.”

Ms. Jones had figured to spend a year in Italy mending her heart and reputation. Instead, she stayed for a decade and returned to making public art there, focusing on the derelict banks of the Tiber.

For her [“Eternal Tiber” project](#), she used a combination of power-washing and stenciling to fashion a dozen she-wolves, based on Rome’s mascot, on the 32-foot-tall travertine wall along one of the river’s banks. For [Rome’s 2,758th birthday](#) in 2005, she lighted the Tiber with 2,758 floating candles. She still hopes to install a ceiling-to-floor design, made from monofilament thread and called “Gravity,” in the Pantheon.

If most people simply navigate their environment, Ms. Jones prefers to imbue hers with spatial and spiritual significance. The youngest of three children of a poet and an American diplomat (or so she thought) posted to a kaleidoscopic array of European cities, she first envisioned herself as a magician.

At a family meeting over the dinner table in Oslo when she was 12 and old enough to keep a secret, she says she was enlightened about her father’s real profession: C.I.A. operative. “In Warsaw our walls were repainted every month,” she said, “because they were making sure the rooms weren’t bugged.”

In their teens, Ms. Jones and her sisters completed their schooling in the United States. For her, this meant Concord Academy in Massachusetts and then the Rhode Island School of Design, where, encouraged by a speech by Christo, she decided to expand her artistic ambitions beyond ceramics. She met Mr. Ginzel, an assistant to the artist [Red Grooms](#), in 1981 while she was a graduate student at Yale, and they married in 1986.

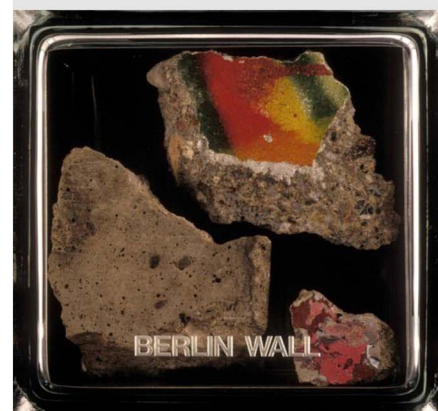
They received their first Public Art Fund [commission](#) in 1987 for “Panemone,” a temporary sculpture in City Hall Park, and in 1989 they received a commission to design the popular “Mnenomics” time capsule wall at the new Stuyvesant High School. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority commissioned their “Oculus” design for the World Trade Center subway hub connecting the Chambers Street and Park Place stations (for it, Ms. Jones photographed the left eye of 1,200 high school students, then had 300 eyes rendered in Italian mosaics). The pièce de résistance of that 1995 project is a map of New York City rendered in 1.8 million pieces of stone.

Those endeavors led to the commission, following a design competition, for “Metronome.” It was a monster project — Ms. Jones refers to it as a “four-year epic” and says that important elements of the design, including night lighting and a steam geyser, were not incorporated as planned. The goal, according to the artists, was a “grandiose public clock and glockenspiel with which New Yorkers could confront the dissolution of time.” Mr. Muschamp grouched that it “incoherently tracks some chronological measurement not worth thinking about.” Another Times critic, Ken Johnson, cited the work’s [“post-](#)



“Gravity” is a proposed work of thread, a bronze plummet, and an aluminum ring to go in the Pantheon, the nearly 2,000-year-old building in Rome. Ms. Jones hopes to receive permission to install this collaboration with the composer Walter Branchi for a 24-hour-period.

Credit: Marcello Meis



Ms. Jones and Mr. Ginzel are responsible for the “Mnenomics” project at Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. It is a time-capsule wall that features actual pieces of the Berlin Wall, snow from Mount Fuji, as well as mementos selected by each graduating class. There are enough capsules to accommodate additions through 2080.

Credit: Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel

[modernist allegorical pretension](#),” but more positively noted that “it enlivens our experience of the city.”

Kent Barwick, then president of the Municipal Art Society, which oversaw the design competition, said the Union Square site demanded art on an over-the-top scale. “Everyone said, ‘Let’s do something out of the ordinary,’ and something out of the ordinary was done,” he said. “Love it or hate it, you’re conscious of it.”

“Until Metronome, we were together night and day, living and working and collaborating and sharing every thought, and then suddenly we weren’t,” Ms. Jones said recently in the Bleecker Street studio/loft where she began living and working, with and without Mr. Ginzel, in 1982. She disclosed this while sipping tea from a green mug, as she nestled in an antique chair with carved wooden gargoyles for armrests. A leftover eyeball from “Oculus” stared out from above the kitchen sink. Mr. Ginzel’s collection of antique plumbs occupied the wall behind the wood-burning stove, and the man himself was at work in the front studio.

The artists arrived at a professional truce after Ms. Jones made peace with Mr. Ginzel’s having fathered a son while she was away in Rome. They now compete as a team in roughly a dozen public design competitions each year. “Last year we competed for 12 projects and got none,” Ms. Jones said. “It’s hard work.”

They did win a competition sponsored by New Jersey Transit, for an installation at the [newly renovated 1907 Hoboken Ferry Terminal](#). The piece, “Fluent,” a mélange of 190 stainless steel shapes dangling above, and dipping into, the Hudson River, was unveiled Dec. 7 at the terminal’s grand reopening. They have also collaborated on a mosaic project at the Kansas City International Airport and are completing an installation for the library at Snow College in Ephraim, Utah.

And they confide in each other constantly. “This is not to say we couldn’t survive as artists on our own,” Mr. Ginzel, 57, said, “but we realize how much energy can be gotten by projecting thoughts and ideas into realms where you wouldn’t normally project. In a sense it’s like having another mind, an alter ego.”

These days they also work alone. Rome is contemplating Ms. Jones’s proposal to reveal 65 more she-wolves (grime has already obscured the original dozen) on the walls that border the Tiber, for the city’s 2,765th birthday next year. In New York, she has plans for the [Park Avenue Armory](#), where she wants to install a double helix of monofilament threads; and for the airspace above 16th Street west of the [High Line](#), where she hopes to suspend “X-ing,” an arrangement of Valentine-red strapping between two buildings.

Then there are the trees. Ms. Jones’s idea is to celebrate five of them, one from each borough. Arbor Day 2013 (April 26) is the target date for the 24-hour event.

“This tree kind of chose me,” she said of the Hangman’s Elm. As with the Tiber in Rome, she considers the trees natural wonders given short shrift by the city they nurture.

Deterring her is not an option. Adrian Benepe, the parks commissioner, has already found that out; so has [Benjamin Swett](#), the photographer and author of “The Great Trees of New York,” whom Ms. Jones has enlisted in identifying the five boroughs’ most extraordinary trees, with age, height and beauty as major criteria.

“She’s tenacious,” he said.

“I was daunted when I first got back to the city,” Ms. Jones said. “But now the ideas are just bursting out of me.”

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Ms. Jones in the Bleecker Street loft and studio where she lives and works. She and Mr. Ginzel share studio space and each has a separate office. The swaths of aluminum foil are rubbings of the bark from the trees she’s encountered as she searches for candidates for her “Explore” event.

Credit: Chang W. Lee/The New York Times



Work being done in 1999 on “Oculus” for New York’s subway system. The installation included 300 mosaic eyeballs rendered in glass and stone as well as a map of New York City intertwined with the continents and a reflecting pool dominated by an eye.

Credit: Suzanne DeChillo / The New York Times



Ms. Jones and Mr. Ginzel took the ferry to attend the ceremony marking the reopening of the 1907 Hoboken Ferry Terminal, for which they designed “Fluent.” Ms. Jones says Mr. Ginzel is an artistic genius; Mr. Ginzel says Ms. Jones has enough creative energy to create an infinite number of public art events. “We never do the same type of thing twice,” he said.

Credit: Chang W. Lee/The New York Times



“Fluent” explores the wind, tides and currents generated by the waves of commuters who pass through the Hoboken Terminal. It consists of 190 stainless steel elements, some of them immersed in the Hudson at high tide.

Credit: Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

