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In Liberty State Park, A New French Statue Comes to Life



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Milène Guermont's standing in her blinking solar-powered statue "Benben NJ" (Tris McCall/Jersey City Times)



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About 5 Minutes

It could be an element pinched from a Jodorowsky movie, or a grounded ferris wheel cabin, or the set for the video for Gary Numan's "Cars." In timeless Liberty State Park, its futurism feels a little out of place. But Milène Guermont's blinking solar-powered statue "Benben NJ" is good fun, and fun is something that ought never be taken for granted.

The light-up pyramid, unveiled at a Monday night ceremony attended by the Mayor, a representative of the Governor's office, Sam Pesin of the Friends of Liberty State Park, and the artist herself, is ours for the next month and a half. From the waterfront walkway immediately east of the Nature Center, it'll flash its colors in the general direction of New York City. Should you visit after sunset, there's absolutely no way to miss it. It looks unlike anything else in the park: four ten-foot lightsabers joined at their tip and framed in ultralight aluminum. If you're so inclined, you can step inside, stand on a polished black platform, and bathe in the illumination. Selfie opportunities this dramatic don't come along every day.

"Benben" is named after the mythical stone that rose from the waters of chaos at the dawn of time. It was, the ancient Egyptians believed, the beginning of the world and the commencement of civilization. In a speech loaded with charm and magnanimity, Guermont explained that Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, the French creator of the Statue of Liberty, originally planned the colossus to stand in Port Said. When the Egyptians demurred, Bartholdi redirected his energies toward the United States. By hanging an Egyptian name on a pyramid erected in the United States within plain view of Lady Liberty, Guermont, the French artist, means to honor the history of the project and reaffirm the cultural and political connections between the three countries.

She also means for visitors to have a blast. "Benben" is sleek, economical in its lines, eye-catching, and, as it blinks and beckons, downright flirty. It seems designed to allow couples to pose for photographs together. Attractive-looking in the daytime, "Benben" becomes more appealing as the sky darkens. Stare at the radiant columns of this light-up teepee long enough, and the afterimages it generates might make you think it's twirling.

Milène Guermont brings an impressive résumé to Jersey City. She's established a reputation for enlivening austere landscapes without disrespecting them. Though she was born in Saint-Hilaire-du-Harcouet in rural Normandy and still identifies with the French countryside, she's made a glowing mark for herself in the capital. "Benben" is similar to "Pyramidon," a habitable obelisk installed at UNESCO's headquarters in 2018. Two years before that, Guermont made headlines by erecting a statue at the eastern end of the Champs-Élysées that interacted with the Eiffel Tower.

Those Paris pieces were biometric. Guermont, an engineer as well as an artist, calibrated them to respond to the respiration and heartbeat of visitors. The same is true of "Benben." Mount the podium and pop your finger into a sensor that might remind you, uncomfortably, of a nurse's oximeter, and the flashing lights of the statue will synchronize with your pulse.

Observers of the Jersey City art scene may be reminded of 14C artist Anna Collevecchio's "Respira Luminari" pieces. These, too, are artworks that align themselves with the cardiovascular systems of willing participants. Inanimate objects they are, but they seem to breathe along with the gallerygoer. Collevecchio invites visitors to encounter her luminous objects in a cave-like setting of her own creation. Guermont, by contrast, asks you to check your pulse in public, under the stars. Should you wish to plug yourself into her creation, you'll have to come to Liberty State Park at 4 p.m. on a Saturday. The biometric elements of "Benben" only operate under the supervision of LSP personnel.

And that's okay. You don't need to physically interact with "Benben" to enjoy it. Even with no human connected to its sensor, it makes for an impressive nightlight. As many hi-tech modern artists do, Guermont encourages you to download an app to your phone to register and post the photos you take while in its electric cocoon; you don't have to do that, either. It's best appreciated as an incongruous but clever addition to a familiar landscape — one painted mint green to resemble the Statue of Liberty and the Verrazzano Bridge.

Even though Guermont made the piece for this specific location on the globe, it won't be here for long. In mid-December, "Benben" will relocate to another part of the Garden State. It seems a downright shame that a piece created to be in dialogue with Lady Liberty will drop the conversation so unceremoniously, but many intense relationships do end that way.

As for Guermont herself, the erection of the statue is only the beginning of a much more sweeping creative endeavor for her: one in which many parallel Benben, each a node in a network, glow throughout the nation. A sister statue, painted in desert colors, makes its premiere in Arizona next month. The sculptor means to design a separate "Benben" for each of the fifty states. Let's hope she has better luck tackling the immensity of the United States than Sufjan Stevens did.

In her speech, Guermont called for Jersey City artists to use "Benben NJ" as a platform. Read poetry on it, she said; dance on it; make it a stage for performance. I think we ought to take her up on that. If you do, be sure to let her know.