FRENCH MORNING

"*BENBEN*": Facing the Statue of Liberty, a Pyramid That Lights Up to the Rhythm of Your Heart

By Olivia Deslandes



Simulation of the BENBEN installation in Liberty State Park.

The Statue of Liberty celebrated yesterday the 140th anniversary of its installation in New York Harbor, an occasion that makes both American and French hearts beat a little faster.

And it is precisely the rhythm of the heart that French artist Milène Guermont proposes to capture in order to illuminate *BENBEN*, the installation she will unveil starting Monday, November 2, in Jersey City, just a short distance from its big sister, Lady Liberty.

Every Saturday between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m., visitors will be able to head to Liberty State Park and step inside the heart of the pyramid-shaped structure, experiencing its vibrations while facing the Manhattan skyline. The lighting will be automated at all other times.

The experience can also be recorded on video using a free application.

"You will be able to send your light, your heartbeat, to someone," explains Milène Guermont, visibly excited about her project.

From Place de la Concorde to Liberty State Park

She is as romantic as she is passionate about materials, structure and design. Following in the footsteps of Gustave Eiffel, she has forged her own distinctive path, combining the roles of engineer and artist. She is, in fact, qualified in both disciplines (ENSAD and ENSIACET–Brown University–Mines).

For the artist-engineer, presenting her work *PHARES* in Paris, between the Eiffel Tower and the Concorde Obelisk, in 2015 and 2016, was an obvious choice. The 30-metre-high pyramid marked her first major step into the public space of a major capital city.

She describes a special feature that was introduced for Valentine's Day:

> *"For four days, PHARES lit up in response to your heartbeat. And the Eiffel Tower and Montparnasse Tower lit up in unison."*

The Parisian artist had therefore already been using visitors' heartbeats to activate the lighting of her artwork. Today, *BENBEN* takes this experience a step further.





Milène Guermont, PHARES, Place de la Concorde, 2015–2016. © Milène Guermont.

One *BENBEN* in Every State

While Milène Guermont hopes to bring a version of *BENBEN* to Paris, at Place de l'Alma, as a nod to the Parisian replica of Bartholdi's famous work, the concept is set to spread across the United States.

The sculpture will change color depending on the state in which it is installed.

Following the green version, inspired by the Statue of Liberty, in Jersey City (New Jersey), Milène Guermont has planned an orange installation in Tucson, Arizona, on December 6 and 7. After that... the details remain top secret, as discussions are still underway.

She hints that Houston may be on the programme for March.

The goal is to reach all 50 American states. Milène Guermont is also issuing an open invitation: anyone interested in hosting a *BENBEN* is encouraged to get in touch.

> *"We are looking for meaningful locations, all very different, as iconic as possible and representative of each state."*

When presenting her project, the artist also highlights its resource efficiency.

> *"We can continue to think big while being economical in terms of materials and energy."*

Here, she is speaking once again as an engineer.

> *"For me, science is a tool. If I weren't an engineer, I wouldn't be able to do the work I do today."*

Among the sculpture's key features are the lightweight anodized aluminum structure, weighing just 22 kilograms, and its photovoltaic system, which give *BENBEN* a small environmental footprint.

The entire project is 100% made in France.



Simulation of BENBEN installations across the American landscape. © Milène Guermont.

A Portrait of America

Ultimately, the artist, who lives and works in Paris, wants to create a portrait of the United States.

> *"For me, the beauty of this country lies in its diversity. In its people, but also in its landscapes."*

Despite the difficulties she has encountered, the artist is determined to pursue her project until 2036.

> *"I have wanted to abandon this project several times because it is extremely difficult to make it happen as a foreign woman. Working in public spaces immediately involves funding, insurance and a great deal of time."*

Nevertheless, Milène Guermont has seized opportunities in both the United States and France, where she has consistently built relationships with influential figures such as the renowned TGV designer Roger Tallon, art dealer Pierre Cornette de Saint-Cyr and architect Claude Parent.

Today, the outlook is brighter. *BENBEN* seems ready to travel across American soil.

While the pedestal is currently being completed at the studios of Kieran Timberlake, the renowned Philadelphia-based architecture firm, Milène Guermont is already in discussions with museums that may acquire the sculptures following their temporary exhibitions.

But what does *BENBEN* actually mean?

According to Egyptian mythology, the *Benben* is the primordial mound that emerged from the primordial waters, upon which the creator god Atum first stood.

By extension, the word came to refer to the sacred stone upon which the first rays of the sun fell.

For Guermont, light is essential to bringing people together, at a time when the world is tearing itself apart, and to expressing the idea that "we are capable of achieving things together."

Green Ring, Liberty State Park, Jersey City, New Jersey. On display until Wednesday, December 30.