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Dell Medical School Building Features Soaring Sculpture *Passage* from Blanton Museum of Art

Paul Villinski, *Passage*, 2011, salvaged wood, found aluminum cans, wire, soot, and steel, 184 x 396 x 38 in., Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of the artist, 2017
AUSTIN, Texas – Dell Medical School at The University of Texas will be the new home of Paul Villinski’s ethereal sculpture, Passage, a floating wood and metal sculpture on loan to Dell Med from the Blanton Museum of Art. The installation process begins this week at the school’s Health Learning Building as the centerpiece of its five-story glass-encased atrium space.

“In conversations with students, we have talked about how the two major elements of butterflies and airplane suggest a relationship between nature and technology, and how medicine engages information from both domains,” said Ray Williams, the Blanton’s director of education and academic affairs, who has focused on Passage when teaching Dell Med students.

“The spiraling butterflies, lifting and supporting the incomplete machine, evoke the power and inevitability of nature, even amidst the pursuit of new technologies,” Williams explained.

The sculpture is a natural fit for Dell Med given its emphasis on the humanities as a way to educate future physicians, Williams said. The school’s curriculum incorporates an experiential learning course at the Blanton for first-year students, designed to help build skills in empathetic communication, emotional intelligence, observation, mindfulness and self-care.

The installation, which Villinski characterizes as “inspired by the notion of magic realism,” is an almost full-scale glider airplane frame made of reclaimed wood collected by the artist from the streets around his neighborhood in Long Island City, New York. With its 33-foot wingspan, the aircraft appears to be lifted into flight by 1,000 black butterflies formed out of aluminum cans, also foraged from the streets. Villinski characterizes the butterflies, a common element within his oeuvre, as a symbol of community.

“This couldn’t be a better illustration of the aspirations of a vital, inclusive health ecosystem,” said Dell Med Dean Clay Johnston, M.D., PhD. “Some of those butterflies are our faculty, staff and students. But more are the people we work with in the community. Yes, there’s technology, but it won’t fly without us working in concert.”
Villinski’s piece joins several distinctive pieces of visual art already on display at Dell Med, including sculptures by Seymour Lipton and Marc Quinn, and photography by Ann Hamilton – all part of UT’s Landmarks public art program.

*Passage* will remain at Dell Med on a 15-year loan. The piece was previously installed in the Blanton’s atrium for about five years. Villinski, who will be at the medical school this week to supervise the installation, expects the process to be challenging due to a completely new configuration of the airplane’s position in the air.

“This is an exercise in possibility,” Villinski said. “If these littered aluminum soda and beer cans that were crushed by traffic and trampled by people walking by every day can become a flock of butterflies, what else is possible?”