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Check out Staten Island's latest public art installation: Sky-Cycles

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Paul Villinski's SkyCycles is now on display at the Ocean Breeze Athletic Complex.

(Courtesy Paul Villinski Studios, Inc.)

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A wooden model of Paul Villinski's SkyCycles, which was commissioned by the city for the Ocean Breeze Athletic Complex. (Courtesy Paul Villinski Studios, Inc.)



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The making of Paul Villinski's SkyCycles, which was commissioned by the city for the Ocean Breeze Athletic Complex.

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — When you first see them, you might wonder: Do they really work?

That's the intended reaction artist Paul Villinski had in mind when he created "Sky-Cycles," a set of three bicycles attached to glider wings, inside the newly opened Ocean Breeze Athletic Complex.

"We got some help from an engineering outfit on the project, and a bunch of guys with engineering degrees came up to me and said, 'It doesn't work, does it?' At that point, I knew that we were succeeding," said Villinski, who worked with a team of four other artists on the installation.

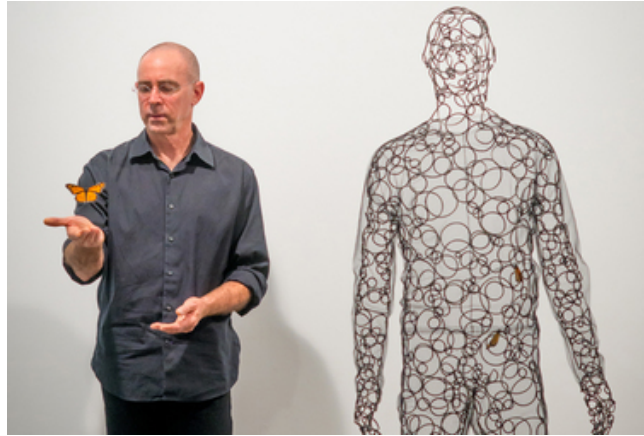
Villinski is a Queens resident whose work has appeared in museums across the country, from the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio to New York City's Museum of Arts and Design.

He said he had hoped the giant "Sky-Cycles" suspended from the complex's ceiling would make people stop and question whether the bicycles could actually fly.

"My goal was to have them be as realistic as possible," Villinski said. "I want viewers to look at these sculptures and not know whether they're actual flying machines or whether it's something else. It's a great way to make people engage with the art."

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Artist Paul Villinski created "Sky-Cycles" for the Ocean Breeze Athletic Complex. (Courtesy the artist)

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The engagement aspect was especially important to the project. Since most of the installation's viewers won't necessarily be in the mindset of looking at art — they're there to exercise, or they're just passing by — stopping to wonder about the piece's purpose will help it accomplish the desired effect, Villinski said.

"The hope is that people engage, but then, they wonder, 'If it did work, where would I want to go? What would it be like if I could just pedal off?'"

And even though it actually doesn't fly, Villinski, a licensed pilot, went through lengths to at least make it appear as if it could. Villinski designed the wings such that pedaling could translate into propelling, and steering could move the control devices on the plane.

The piece is a fitting symbol for the \$93 million athletic complex, which opened this month after nearly a quarter century of planning for one. It will house professional track facilities and other athletic equipment. Many of the people who train there will be elite athletes — so the metaphor flying brings to mind the idea of accomplishing the impossible.

The city's "Percent for Art" program commissioned the piece. Villinski said one of the requirements for the commission was that it last for 75 years with minimal maintenance. That means it'll be around for generations, Villinski said.

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"It was the very first time I had thought about artistic legacy," he said. "It occurred to me that my son and my assistant's son might walk into that building in 50 years and see what their dads did. So just being able to make a contribution like that is profoundly important to me."