

Art in America

Art in Transit: A Conversation with Shinique Smith

By Melissa C Morris
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As part of New York City's MTA Arts for Transit program, Shinique Smith has recently completed a 6,672-square-foot permanent public work at Central Harlem's newly renovated Mother Clara Hale Bus Depot. For the project, the Hudson, N.Y.-based artist created laminated glass window panels throughout the building and installed a massive mosaic titled *Mother Clara's Garden* on the bus depot's block-long facade. *A.i.A.* toured the site and spoke with Smith earlier this month.

MELISSA C. MORRIS *Mother Clara's Garden* began as a smaller painting and was converted into a large mosaic. How was that process of transformation?

SHINIQUE SMITH Exciting! Before this project came up, I never thought about translating my work through mosaic, but now I'm kind of in love with the idea. The final mosaic is different from the original painting—it's almost like it's more alive because of the expanded size and the complexity

of what's going on with the materials.

MORRIS The fluid lines throughout your piece give it a feeling of spontaneity, but that's in sharp contrast to the deliberate, meticulous work of assembling a mosaic. Could you talk about the play between these two forces?

SMITH I like dancing between restraint and chaos, and am trying to find a balance with that. This project was about translating those dynamic gestures into something static, something that stands.

MORRIS In terms of the materials, there is immense variety in the types of mosaic tiles. How did you achieve this?

SMITH I worked with a very hands-on mosaic fabricator. The tiles are not just flat-printed or flat-painted. There's a lot of handwork in each of them, like taking fabric and pressing it into wet clay to create roughness and texture on the surface. The whole process is a collage, even within the individual tiles.

MORRIS Your work often includes found objects. Is that the case here?

SMITH Yes, I went to the neighborhood several times and walked the path between Mother Clara Hale's house and the bus depot. I gathered up items I found along the way—scraps of fliers, bits of matter, some clothing—and incorporated these materials into the piece.

During one of my visits, I found a child's drawing on the street. It showed a smiling little girl in a rainbow-colored dress waiting at the bus stop right near the depot. I kept that girl's drawing and thought about it for inspiration with both the spirit and colors of my piece.

MORRIS And aren't there other children's drawings included in the vertical glass windows along the sides of the bus depot as well?

SMITH Yes. The idea of the children in the neighborhood kept coming up, so I went to a local elementary school and worked directly with a second grade class. I brought in flowers, we talked about observation, and then they used markers and crayons to draw what they saw. The children came up with some really great drawings! I scanned the ones that I could really incorporate, added their names and integrated them into the glass panels.

MORRIS How does your work respond to the building, and the legacy of its namesake, Clara Hale?

SMITH Well, the bus depot is a green building, using recycled materials in its structure and recycled water to wash the buses. I kept with that theme by repurposing local materials. Mother Clara took in children from broken homes and helped out families that were struggling. So I got this idea of creating and tilling a sort of garden with the bits of matter that no one wanted—to show a kinship to the work she did.

And just prior to making this piece, my grandma passed away. Something about the way Mother Clara was with kids reminded me of my grandma, who worked at a kindergarten and had daycare at her house.

Both women were from the same era, and I couldn't help but overlay their similar motherly/grandmotherly nurturing spirits.