

New Book Casts Spotlight On NYC's Underground Artworks

By Jane Levere | March 25, 2015

The New York City subway system may be known for its size, age and even delays. But a new book by Monacelli Press sheds a spotlight on its extensive art collection, 250 permanent works commissioned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority since the mid-1980's.

New York's Underground Art Museum: MTA Arts and Design—by Sandra Bloodworth, director of MTA Arts & Design, and William Ayres, a curator specializing in 19th and 20th century American art—is 264 pages long, in full color, and contains 300 images illustrating the stories behind the artwork.

One work, Leo Villareal's *Hive*—at a transfer point between the uptown 6 train and the B, D, F and M trains at Bleecker Street—is a web of ceiling-mounted, colorful LED lights that pulse and change color as subway passengers move through the station below. “Electronic code is Villareal’s medium, and he cleverly exploits it, understanding the brain’s need to recognize patterns and engaging each of us to arrive at a unique meaning,” the authors write. “As passengers stand on the platform, waiting for the train, they are engaged by the work as they look for patterns within the random progression of light.” In the book’s forward, actor Stanley Tucci, DCI Morton in *Fortitude*, said, “Traveling from home to work, and back again, day after day is a necessity. To do so in an environment that incorporates art can make the usual unusual, the ordinary – more than that – the boring, stimulating, and what is ugly ... maybe beautiful.”

“It is this very thing to which MTA Arts & Design has devoted nearly thirty years. The program has rescued and recreated artisanal works of the past and created new works of art for the future. This visual feast, through which we are fortunate enough to move, is as ambitious as anything the WPA achieved seventy-some years ago,” he added.

The book is an update of an earlier book, *Along the Way*, published by Monacelli in 2006 and written by the same authors. The new book contains information on some 100 works of art installed over the past eight years and about works that have been commissioned but are not installed yet, such as those for the new Second Avenue Subway stations and extended 7 line.

Artists whose new work is featured include Xenobia Bailey, James Carpenter, Ellen Harvey, Sol LeWitt, Jason Middlebrook, Odili Donald Odita, Duke Riley, Holly Sears, Jean Shin, Alyson Shotz, Shinique Smith, Doug and Mike Starn, and Allan and Ellen Wexler.

The MTA began its arts program in the mid-1980s to invite customers back into what was then viewed as a decaying subway system, provide a sense of security and warmth, and enliven and beautify stations. As part of the national “percent for art” public art movement, the MTA sets aside one percent of its capital budget to create and install artwork when stations are renovated or facilities are built. Much of program’s focus over the last eight years has been in subway stations in the city’s outer boroughs.