

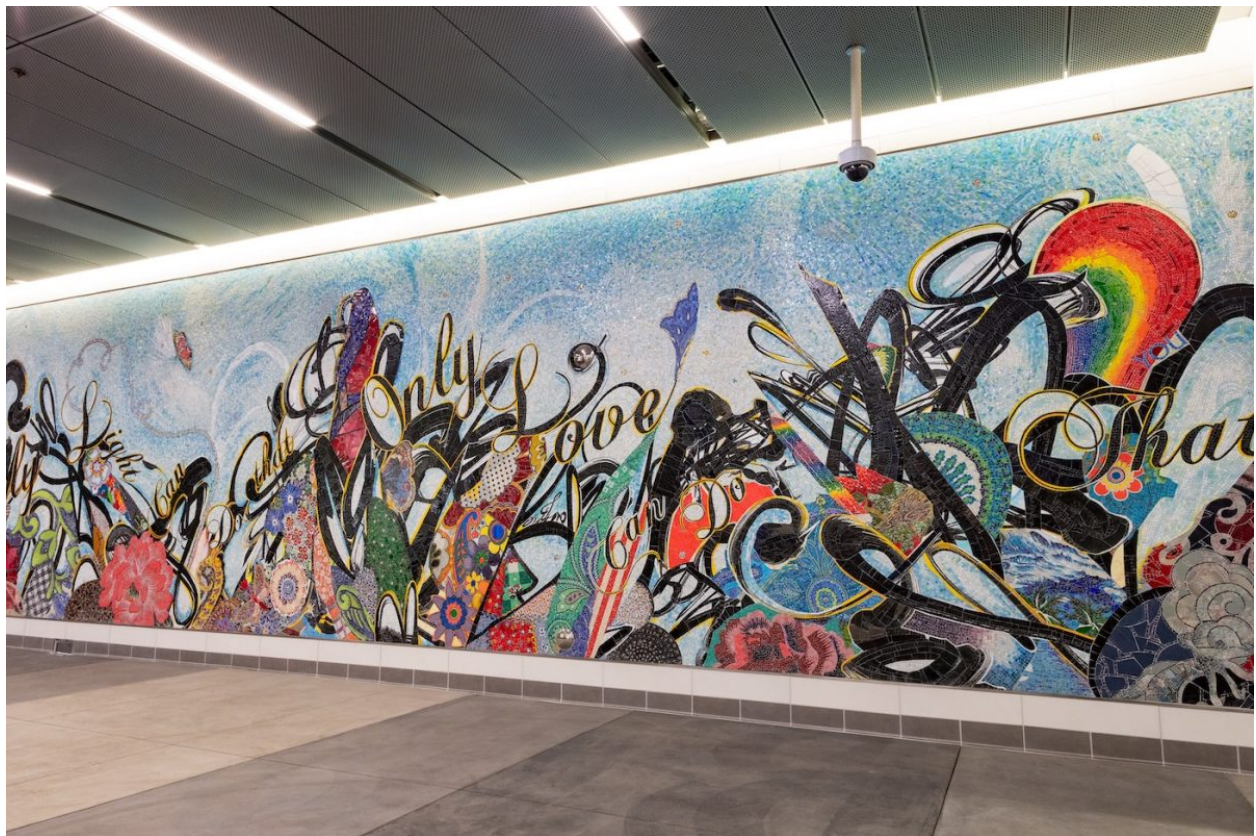
Art

LA's New Metro Line Opens With 14 Public Artworks

Kenturah Davis, Mickalene Thomas, and Shinique Smith are among the artists who created work for the K Line, which connects historical centers of Black American life and culture in LA.

by Matt Stromberg

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Shinique Smith, "Only Light, Only Love" at MLK Jr. Station (photo courtesy LA Metro)

On Friday, October 7, the long-awaited K Line opened to the public, connecting South Los Angeles communities from West Adams and Leimert Park to Inglewood, historic centers of Black American life and culture in LA. The \$2.1 billion light rail line is significant not just for its expansion of public transit options in the previously underserved area but also for its art program, which encompasses 14 artworks by 14 artists across the seven stations. (An eighth station, connecting to the Los Angeles International Airport, is set to open next year.)

Rendered in mosaic, porcelain enamel, or glass panels, the station artworks display a range of styles and subject matter; however, all reflect and respond to the communities around their specific sites. For Ingrid Calame's "Talking Drums" at the Leimert Park Station, the artist collaborated with William Watters and Jasmine Morgan of the RightWay Foundation, a nonprofit that offers support to foster youth. They made rubbings of architectural details, bicycles, and drums in the surrounding area, then collaged those rubbings onto brightly-colored glass panels framing the station's entrance.

At the Martin Luther King, Jr. station, Shinique Smith weaves a quote by King into a jubilant floral patchwork in her mosaic "Only Light, Only Love."

"I wanted there to be a pleasing overall image and within that details that one could meditate on while waiting for the next train," Smith told Hyperallergic. "Also, I wanted to pay homage to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by embedding pieces of his message of love. I think the best metro works uplift and inspire, even at a glance."

To create "Sonder" at the Inglewood Station, Kenturah Davis held an open call for people with connections to the neighborhood from which she made several portraits. About two dozen of these are reproduced on the black-and-white porcelain enamel panels that adorn the above-ground station, portraying a diverse group of individuals sharing the same space but leading separate lives. "I was thinking about public transit as a site for encountering strangers," says Davis, who was raised in Altadena but grew up attending church in South Central.

The work's title comes from John Koenig's 2021 book *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* and refers to "the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own." Davis used rubber stamp letters to write out the complete definition of "sonder" in a grid, which is partially obscured by the portraits, also created from these letter forms. "The really meaningful thing is to hear from the people I got to meet and to see their excitement at seeing themselves represented," she says.

Metro Art was concerned not only with representation, but with audience. "We were looking at who rides the system ... tourists, commuters, someone visiting a cultural destination," Zipporah Yamamoto, senior director of public art and exhibition programs at the Los Angeles Metro, told Hyperallergic. "We're allowing for different levels of experience: a quick read, or you can take it in in bits and pieces." She added that each station has community-facing artwork, offering a visual connection to the streetscape.

The K Line art program began eight years ago with an open call for proposals, with winners selected by a panel of community-based arts professionals. Still, the K Line itself has been called "a blessing and a curse" by community residents, who are wary of its role in spurring development and gentrification. Frustration that the entire route is not underground (the Northernmost three stations are below ground; the other four are at grade) was partially behind the creation of *Destination Crenshaw*, a series of public artworks touted as a "reparative development project" to counter the K Line's disruption.

On opening day, however, riders seemed in good spirits, relieved that the years of planning and construction were finally over and excited to explore the new route.

"I love it. These are our people, that's our community," said a rider who was waiting for the rail at Westchester, the southernmost station, before taking the

eight-and-a-half-mile line back north. “It’s nice that we can be appreciated, that we can have the same perks as other communities.”