

OUT OF THE ARCHIVES AND INTO THE UNDERGROUND

Adrienne and Inga's
MTA Arts & Design tour

ARTICLE AND
PHOTOGRAPHS

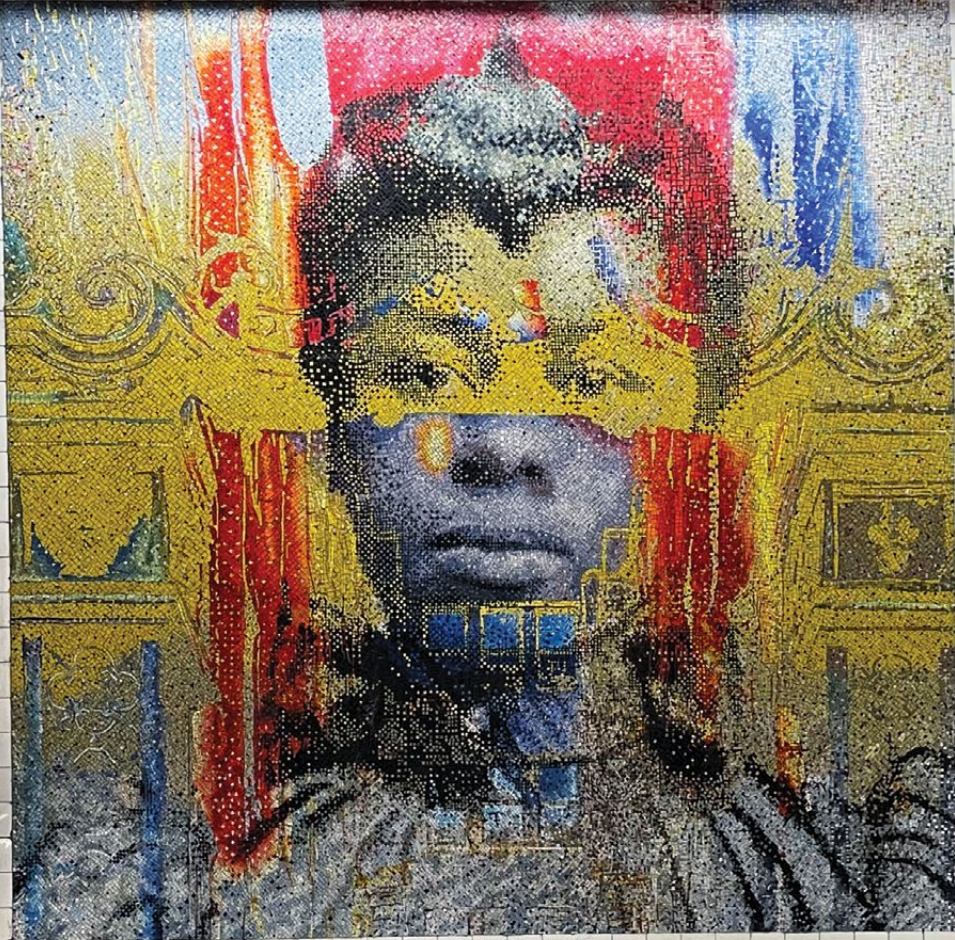
Adrienne Evans
and Inga Velten

A portrait of a historic resident
of Washington Heights, part of
Great Waves of Immigration
(2023) by Carmen Lizardo,
fabricated by Mosaicos
Venecianos de México, 181st
Street Station, Washington
Heights, New York





Uptown to
207 Street



Exit ↗

UPTOWN

WE ESCAPED! From out of the CRP&A's archives and administrative office, we (Inga and Adrienne) were unleashed in New York City in July to explore the boundaries of railroad art. Attending *The Art of Trains*, the wonderfully curated exhibition of Peter and Christine Mosse's cross genera, railroad-themed art collection at Manhattan's Hirschl & Adler Gallery, was a great start. But once the exhibition opening had ended, we had a few additional days in the city and were hungry for more.

We already knew that, in New York, we were virtually surrounded by railroad art. As Justin Franz just described, the MTA Arts & Design program has installed some 400 artworks across New York's subway system and commuter lines. It's a veritable underground treasure trove of site-specific installations, all conveniently connected by rail. So we decided that visiting a bunch of the MTA art installations at various transit locations would be a fun way to see more of the city. Plus, we figured the experience would further expand our notions of railroad art. We knew that many of the artworks we'd encounter would likely complicate our definitions of the genera (many are located in rail environments, but don't explicitly feature anything rail-related as their subject matter, for instance). However, along our journey, we discovered that the MTA works resonated with themes we've seen repeated throughout the Center's photographic and fine art collections: warm sentimentality for people and places left behind; the importance of acknowledging historical events; and an emphasis on hyper-locality, community, and representing an "art of place."

A warm welcome

Following an exhilarating but exhausting first few days in New York, a stop at world-renowned artist Yayoi Kusama's 120-foot long, cheerfully vibrant glass mosaic, *A Message of Love Directly From My Heart unto the Universe*, was a much-needed pick-me-up. Situated along a lengthy concourse in the Long Island Rail Road's (LIRR) new-in-2023 Grand Central Madison terminal, the mural injected energy and a sense of fun into a space that would have otherwise seemed a bit sterile in its newness. As a long-time fan of Kusama's work, Adrienne had fun picking out familiar figures and motifs from the rest of the artist's oeuvre amongst the mural's variegated fields of orange, white, and blue.

While one may find Kusama's installations and infinity rooms more engaging, we really enjoyed

our time with *Message*. This was likely due to the more personal nature of the work and its underlying sentimentality. From 1958 to 1972, Kusama spent the tumultuous early years of her career living in New York. While she eventually returned to her native Japan, Kusama retained warm feelings towards the city and its people, which she made manifest in the mural. She even wrote a short verse to accompany the work:

This is Yayoi Kusama.

I offer you a message of love, directly from my heart unto the universe.

May you all experience the true beauty of loving humanity. Human life is beautiful.

My wish is to deliver this vision, with all that is in my life, to the people of New York.

After a few days of indifferent locals, busy schedules, and crowded subways, spending time with Kusama's grinning suns, friendly looking blobs, and brightly colored polka dots was comforting, like a cordial greeting from a friend. What a great start to our adventure.

Homages to legacy and place

The next few stops on our unofficial MTA art tour felt like absolute must-dos, as each was conceived at the intersection of history, archives, and locality (just a few of our favorite things here at the Center). We first had the opportunity to visit Penn Station, infamous amongst architecture and rail historians who still lament the calamitous loss of its ornate head house to the construction of Madison Square Garden in the mid-1960s. Many say the public outrage over the demolition sparked the architectural preservation movement as well as the formation of the New York City Landmarks Commission (which would later play a major role in the salvation of Grand Central Terminal in 1978).

It's little wonder, then, that tributes to the original structure's long-lost architectural treasures abound throughout the station. Located on the mezzanine level, past the turnstiles, Diana Al-Hadid's *The Arches of Old Penn Station* reconstructs the Beaux-Arts arches of the station's original glass atrium in iridescent lines of white and gold on a field of blue. Impressionistic, the mosaic was originally translated into tile from a gestural line drawing on mylar. The result looks almost abstract, its spectral architecture visible only to the observant few.



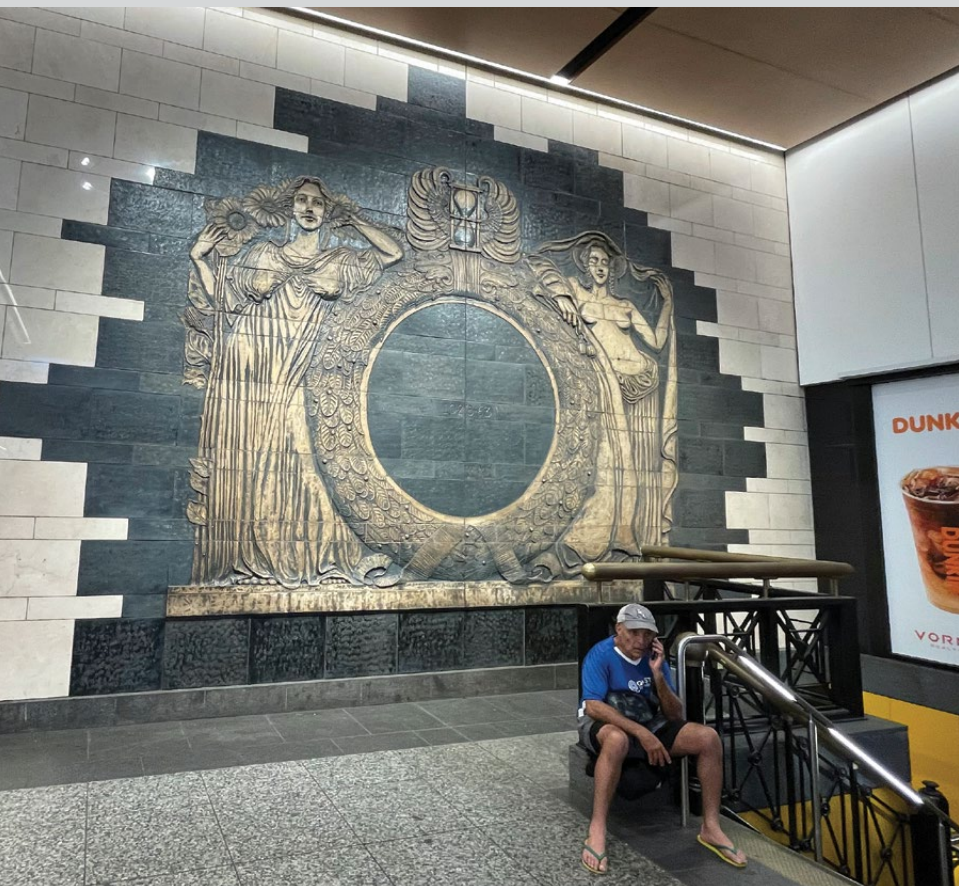
Detail from *A Message of Love, Directly from My Heart unto the Universe* (2022) by Yayoi Kusama, fabricated by Miotto Mosaics Art Studios, Grand Central Madison, Manhattan, New York



Left: *A Message of Love, Directly from My Heart unto the Universe* (2022) by Yayoi Kusama, fabricated by Miotto Mosaics Art Studios, Grand Central Madison, Manhattan, New York

Below: *The Arches of Old Penn Station* (2018) by Diana Al-Hadid, fabricated by Mayer of Munich, Penn Station, Manhattan, New York





Wandering further, we also came across the terra cotta murals of Andrew Leicester's *Ghost Series*, additional memorials to the old station. Located at the east end of LIRR's north concourse, the allegorical maidens of *Night and Day* are a reinterpretation of the original Adolph Weinman sculptures that graced station entrances. They're made all the more poignant when one considers *New York Times* photographer Eddie Hausner's famous 1966 image of one of the statues in a Meadowlands landfill. Then, at the east end of the concourse, we encountered *Plinth*, which features crumbling Corinthian columns reminiscent of the 1910 station's vast main waiting room. The net effect of Al-Hadid and Leicester's murals was a haunting one—we've both marveled at photos of the old Penn Station in the Center's collections but never really registered the magnitude of its loss until it was right in front of us.

Located on the Second Avenue Subway at 63rd Street Station, Jean Shin's *Elevated* was a variation on a similar theme. Inspired by Shin's archival research into the history of the neighborhood, the multi-media work uses every level of the station to pay homage to a NYC transit milestone: the dismantling of the Second and Third Avenue elevated tracks (El) in the 1940s. Entering the station at Third Avenue, we were immersed in the cranes and construction beams that tore down the El, all depicted in rust-colored ceramic with a slight relief. The dark beams gave way to white tile as we descended the escalator to the mezzanine level.

There, we experienced the heart of the piece. Glass mosaics installed throughout the mezzanine portray the El's former riders on their daily commutes—Shin plucked these figures right from archival photographs—backed by a cloudy blue sky interrupted by large stretches of vacant, white tiles. The negative space is meant to represent the absence of the El after its dismantling. Taking it all in, we were struck by the intermingling of past and present as subway riders rushed to and fro, their demeanors and body language frequently mirroring the people depicted in the mural. Some aspects of transit are universal, regardless of era.

After a short elevator ride down to the platform, we found the final layer of *Elevated*. Large panels of amber-colored glass depict the streets of the old neighborhood surrounding the El. Adrienne was delighted to learn that these scenes were sourced from photo archives as well. This is the power of archives at work!





Left: Details of cranes and construction beams mark the entry to *Elevated* (2017) by Jean Shin, this level fabricated by Frank Giorgini, 63rd Street Station, Manhattan, New York

Below: A detail from *Elevated* (2017) by Jean Shin, this level fabricated by Miotto Studios, Inc, 63 Street Station, Manhattan, New York.

Opposite, above: *Ghost Series—Night and Day* (1994) by Andrew Leicester, Penn Station, Manhattan, New York.

Opposite, below: *Ghost Series—Plinth* (1994) by Andrew Leicester, Penn Station, Manhattan, New York





Above: The largest mural of *Great Waves of Immigration* (2023) by Carmen Lizardo, fabricated by Mosaicos Venecianos de México, 181st Street Station, Washington Heights, New York

Opposite, above: Inga Velten, development director, with *Perfect Strangers* (2017) by Vik Muniz, fabricated by Mayer of Munich, 72nd Street Station, Manhattan, New York

Opposite, below: A detail from *Perfect Strangers*

Great Waves of Immigration, composed of three murals at the subway station on 181st Street in Washington Heights, is another great use of archival materials to draw connections between memory, place, and community. A mix of historical photographs from the New York Public Library, neighborhood landmarks, and imagery from mural-creator Carmen Lizardo’s own immigration experience, the murals are dedicated to the various cohorts of newcomers who have historically made their homes in Washington Heights. Over the past century, they have included Greeks, Italians, Germans, Jewish communities fleeing the Nazis, and most recently, people from the Dominican Republic, Lizardo’s nation of origin.

Installed on the mezzanine level near the elevators, the largest and most dazzling (in our opinion) of the three murals features monochrome, pixelated figures huddled in a yola (a small boat

known for transporting people fleeing from the Dominican Republic to U.S. territories). Bright cyan and yellow tiles suffuse and highlight the scene, imbuing it with a sense of movement and transformation. The mural’s transition from yellow to blue symbolizes the journey from homeland to new world. Hallmarks of Washington Heights, like the George Washington Bridge, are superimposed on the blue side of the mural, signaling the arrival of the yola and its occupants at their new home.

Elsewhere on the mezzanine level, Lizardo’s companion murals—a set of portraits—are installed on the stairwells to the platforms. Above the downtown stairwell, a Dominican woman’s face regards viewers with a pensive expression, her visage obscured somewhat by a colorful overlay of lettering and design details from a certificate of citizenship. Meanwhile, an image of a historical resident of the neighborhood gazes down at riders from above the



uptown stairwell. Considered collectively, Lizardo's work reminded us that while its face frequently changes, immigration is an integral part of this neighborhood's history and present, and likely its future as well.

Personal connections

While we enjoyed every installation we came across, both of us were particularly moved by specific pieces. Here are our individual perspectives on our favorites:

Parks nestled beside stunning architecture, bridges and streetscapes with endless variety, and ceaseless light, sound, and motion all contribute to the unique bustle and beauty that is New York City. But what brings New York to life are its people—the *Perfect Strangers* depicted in Vik Muniz's aptly named installation of thirty-six life-sized mosaic portraits that grace the walls of the 72nd Street Station.



Encouraged to visit by Peter and Christine Mosse, we stopped by the station on the Monday afternoon following the exhibition opening. We encountered a relatively empty corridor but were pleasantly surprised by live music being performed by a band stationed just beside the escalators. In this setting, we had ample time and space to enjoy each of the beautiful mosaic depictions of the individuals one might share a passenger car with on any given day.

Portrayed in sparkling mosaic, the diversity of the people who inhabit this global city are celebrated, elevating the mundanity of the daily commute. Comical situations (a man dressed in a tiger costume) bring lightness to the installation, while relatable experiences (a mother holding an exhausted toddler while managing a stroller) remind us that we all just have somewhere to be, and getting there isn't always easy. Other characters check their phones, juggle shopping bags, or share a moment together. The inclusion of a gay couple holding hands was recognized as a first for non-political permanent art in the city.

Every one of these strangers made the station a friendlier, happier place—and I like to imagine that the commuters who use the station might come to think of them as friends.

—Inga Velten

Adrienne Evans, director of archives and collections, with internet celebrity bodega cat, Tiger (@tigerthebodegacat on Instagram) at Metro Organic Food, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York

Exiting Bedford Avenue Station in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood on our final day in town, we encountered a strange sight: a fever dream of masked dancers, anthropomorphic cats, and fairy tale characters, all rendered in gleaming, azure-toned tiles, pirouetting beneath a night sky of undulating stripes. Above the figures, a benevolent-faced moon looks on. Intricately patterned curtains frame the scene, creating a surrealist tableau. This spectacle is one part of Marcel Dzama's *No Less than Everything Comes Together*, which includes four large-scale, celestial-themed mosaics located throughout the station—two at the Bedford Avenue mezzanine and two at the Driggs Avenue exits.

This mural, my favorite of the four (on account of the several cats featured), is flanked by stairs that lead up to Driggs and North 7th Street above, causing the bright world to blast in from all sides. Photography was difficult during our visit. Pausing for more than a moment's appreciation was even more so. New Yorkers frequently brushed past (Bedford has become one of MTA's busiest stations in recent years), disinterested in the mural. Or to be more charitable, they were likely just determined to be on their way; Dzama's surreal performers have become part of their daily commute.

For me, however, Dzama's work was worthy of our long pause on the busy stairwell; it holds personal significance for numerous reasons. First, I've been following Dzama's work and career off and on since I was a bratty little hipster back in undergrad, so it felt gratifying to meet him again as a "fully-matured" creative professional. How cool it was to find his work suddenly at the nexus of all my personal and professional interests!

Second, I love the sentiment and intention behind the piece. Dzama took inspiration for *No Less* from Walt Whitman's poem "Crossing the Brooklyn Ferry." In the poem, the narrator, as he crosses the East River with the diverse masses of New York City, has the realization that all of the ferry's riders—past, present, and future—are timelessly bound through their shared human experiences. This stanza feels most relevant:

*Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes,
how curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross,
returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more
to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.*





Above: One of the four celestial-themed mosaic murals in *No Less Than Everything Comes Together* (2021) by Marcel Dzama, fabricated by Mayer of Munich Bedford Ave Station, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York



Left: Adrienne's favorite mural from *No Less Than Everything Comes Together* (2021) by Marcel Dzama, fabricated by Mayer of Munich, Bedford Avenue Station, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York



Above: A Manhattan-bound 1 train of the New York Subway at the 168th Street Station in Jamaica, Queens, New York, in December 1973. Photograph by Henry Posner III, Posner-N-02-056-18

Opposite: Amtrak's *Patriot*, train 169, at Penn Station, New York, New York, on January 16, 1982. Photograph by Karl Zimmermann, Zimmermann-08-074-006

I think this relates to Dzama's murals in that, in each of them, you can see the constant flow of Williamsburg's strange, diverse characters across time. Sharp-eyed viewers can even pick out historical Brooklynites such as Bugsy Siegel and Gene Simmons amongst Dzama's other figures. Like *Perfect Strangers*, Dzama's work is an ode to the community, albeit a very specific one (the murals' stage sets and costumed dancers are reminiscent of Dzama's design work for the New York City Ballet's "The Most Incredible Thing.") However idiosyncratic, the mural still works for the everyday viewer. It reminds one of coming to the big, little village of New York, and all of the fascinating weirdoes, past and present, that you might meet there.

Even now, thinking back on Dzama's work triggers a mental montage of all the interesting, colorful experiences we had our trip: trading wisecracks about Wisconsin cheese with a couple of pizza slingers in Park Slope; pausing amidst the crowds on the Brooklyn Bridge to photograph the rising moon on our first night in town; stopping to play with an internet-famous bodega cat in Williamsburg; and sharing art and community with friends old and new at "The Art of Trains" at Hirschl & Adler. The sum total of all our adventures is just a tenuous grasp at beginning to understand the confounding place that is New York. There's really no other place quite like it.

—Adrienne Evans

Railroad Heritage Visual Archive Updates

Back in Madison at our Monroe Street office, processing archivist Natalie Krecek has returned from leave and resumed her work on the Jim Shaughnessy Collection. Welcome back, Natalie! She's currently finishing the "S" series (frequent readers will remember that it's arranged alphabetically by railroad name). Meanwhile, Martin Kaehrl, our digital projects coordinator, has been working through Karl Zimmermann's black-and-white negatives. Martin has surveyed the collection, recorded all of the metadata associated with negatives selected for digitization, and digitized 300 of them. In mid-August, Martin began his studies as a Ph.D. student with the University of Wisconsin's iSchool, leaving his full-time post with us. While Martin will continue his work with the Zimmermann Collection on a limited schedule, we are hiring a new, full-time digital projects position. Stay tuned for updates.

At our archival storage space, reference and processing archivist Gil Taylor is trucking through the negatives in the Henry Posner III Collection. He's just begun processing the sixth of the eight negative binders, which covers Posner's black-and-white work from 1973 through 1974. Gil projects that he'll be finished with processing the collection later this fall, after which he'll take some time to post selections to Odyssey. Associate archivist Heather Sonntag continues processing the Steinheimer-Burman Collection. Her current work revolves around images of Donner Summit, one of Steinheimer's favorite photographic subjects and locations. Steinheimer's Donner series is arranged chronologically; since May, Heather's digitized images from 1987 through 1994. •

