

NEWSDAY

CREATING BEAUTY FOR COMMUTERS

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Photo credit: Newsday / Audrey C. Tiernan | Carson Fox, an artist and art professor at Adelphi University, poses with her *"Blue Sky Pursuits,"* a stained-glass window installation at the Seaford station of the Long Island Rail Road. (Oct. 3, 2011)

Like many LIRR commuters, Damien Bada usually has his head buried in his smartphone each morning as he waits for a Manhattan bound train at the Valley Stream station.

"But sometimes your phone dies, and you need something to look at," said Bada, 22, an art student and a teacher's aide for a second grade class in Manhattan.

For years, Bada's options were worn poster ads for Broadway shows, train tracks and the blank expressions of fellow travelers. But in 2009, upon completion of a \$4.3-million renovation at the station, Bada's commute got considerably more colorful. On the floor of the ticket office, a warm yellow sun rises over a lush green lawn, bisected by a flowing blue stream. On the walls near the landings of the station's two escalators, birds soar over lampposts and utility lines. And in the station platform waiting room, geese peck around a field just across the way from a stately clock tower. And although Bada, of Valley Stream, may not have noticed that the images are stylized depictions of the community around him, he knew this much: They looked real nice.

"It's very peaceful. It's very calming, subtle," Bada said. "It's not too loud, not too slow."

A THING OF BEAUTY

The ceramic tile mosaics are the work of Swedish-born artist Malin Abrahamsson and come courtesy of the Arts for Transit initiative of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which operates the LIRR. The program, created in 1985, is known most for its underground artworks at more than 150 city subway stations. About 15 Long Island Rail Road stations also serve as galleries for Arts for Transit projects, including a dozen locations in Nassau and Suffolk.

A new project is in the planning stages for Wantagh, MTA officials said.

One percent of the first \$20 million of a station construction or rehabilitation project is dedicated to

Arts for Transit, whose mission is one passed down more than a century ago from the founders of New York's transit system.

"It needed to be engineered to be functional, but also beautiful," said Amy Hausman, assistant director of the program. "The concept is that if you create a place that is beautiful, it will bring out the greater good in people."

From a concrete relief frieze at Bay Shore depicting the Fire Island Lighthouse as a chess piece, to the hand-painted porcelain tiles recalling Merrick's past as a farm town, the LIRR stations that have benefited from Arts for Transit funding boast some of the most iconic and recognizable pieces of art not only on Long Island, but also of Long Island.

"The most important thing is that an artist . . . is responding to the place where the work is going to be installed, and the people who live in that place and the people who lived in that place in the past and the people who may come into that place in the future," Hausman said. "That really is the most important thing -- that the artist is really connecting their work to that place."

That was Ron Baron's objective after he was chosen in 2005 by an MTA Arts for Transit selection panel to create several sculptures for the outdoor waiting area at the Hempstead station. Baron, 53, a Brooklyn resident, said he scoured garage sales and thrift shops in Hempstead to find authentic artifacts from the community's history. He settled on a newspaper account of the Islanders' 1981 Stanley Cup victory, a Hofstra University backpack, a New York Jets training camp football and an ABA basketball -- paying homage to Hempstead native Julius "Dr. J" Irving. Baron arranged the items around old suitcases stacked to create chairs, cast them in bronze and created "Lost and Found: An Excavation Project."

"It was very much about this idea of trying to find objects that reflected the culture and history of Hempstead," he said.

LOCAL CONNECTION

Using email lists and messages posted at art schools and other institutions as well as in art publications, the MTA scours the region for artists to commission. Artists submit samples of past works, and the MTA whittles the pool of applicants to a few dozen, who then go before a selection committee that includes local artists and community leaders who strive to further ensure that a piece of art truly connects with the community where it is displayed.

The MTA informs the artists about the medium they would work in, and the applicants submit their specific vision for a station. The selected artist receives a fee of up to 20 percent of the art project budget, and typically takes at least two years to complete the work.

A commissioned artist visits the station to get familiar with the location and its surroundings. Sometimes the locally inspired projects take artists far from home. For her giant mosaic at the Broadway LIRR station in Flushing, Queens, Jean Shin, 40, traveled to South Korea and had tons of shattered fragments of celadon vases shipped here.

For her installation at the Seaford LIRR station -- the most recently completed Arts for Transit project on Long Island -- Carson Fox flew to Germany to work with a world-renowned stained glass fabricator. Although Fox is already an accomplished sculptor and painter whose work has been displayed in museums and galleries around the globe, the Seaford station project guaranteed her largest audience ever. It also gave her a shot at something rarely achieved by artists: immortality.

"What was most interesting for me and the most fun was the idea that this was something that people

will live with for a long time," said Fox, 41, also of Brooklyn, who responded to an open call from the MTA looking for an artist. "Hopefully, it will be around for a hundred years. And that's really a wonderful thing -- that you might leave that kind of legacy."

The result: "Blue Sky Pursuit," installed in 2009. On the windows of the station's platform waiting room, Fox depicts the patterns in which birds and butterflies crisscross their environment, much as commuters do each day.

DYNAMIC VISION

And it's because commuters will be exposed to a particular art installation every weekday for years on end that MTA Arts for Transit administrators look to commission artists with dynamic visions. Fox's Seaford project, for example, takes on different shapes and colors throughout the day, depending on how the sun peeks through dotted paths in the windows and reflects off assorted jewels.

"We tell them people are going to be looking at this every day for a couple of minutes. So it should be more than one punch line, one visual and you get it. There needs to be some discovery that happens," said Lester Burg, program manager for MTA Arts for Transit. "We want it to sort of unfold over time. You may notice something one day, and something different another."

Besides not being shallow, MTA arts projects also cannot be fragile, Burg noted. Exposed to the elements and to thousands of commuters and rumbling trains each day, the projects must be strong and durable.

Those working in papier-mâché need not apply.

But, in the end, there is little separating a masterpiece at a train station from one at the Met. It's a bit of beauty, culture and inspiration -- all as you wait for the 7:49 to Penn Station.

"It's an everyday thing. It's not going into some threatening, high-end gallery. It's right there when you're commuting," said Joe Zucker, 70, of East Hampton, the artist behind Huntington Station's colorful glass panel installation. "And it can have a positive effect."

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