From Chuck Close to Sarah Sze, a Ride Through the Art of the Second Avenue Subway

New York’s Second Avenue Subway opened on January 1 after almost a century of planning, with new art installations by Chuck Close, Sarah Sze, Vik Muniz, and Jean Shin.

Allison Meier January 2, 2017

On New Year’s Day, there were two ways you could celebrate 2017 on either end of New York City’s Q train: take it all the way to Coney Island and go for a frigid swim with the Polar Bear Club or journey to three new Manhattan stops nearly a century in the making. The Second Avenue Subway, following long delays, incredible cost ($4.5 billion!), and years of construction, finally opened its first phase on January 1.

According to the MTA, it is the system’s “first major expansion in more than 50 years” as well as “the largest permanent public art installation in state history.” That’s due to large-
scale installations that fill the Second Avenue Subway’s four stations (including the existing 63rd and Lexington stop, which was expanded for the line). These public artworks join the extensive underground art museum funded and commissioned by MTA Arts & Design. Much as with last year’s new subway station — 34th Street–Hudson Yards, featuring futuristic art by Xenobia Bailey — the focus is on mosaics. Sarah Sze’s expansive “Blueprint for a Landscape” unfolds across 96th Street, Chuck Closes’s towering “Subway Portraits” loom over pedestrians at 86th Street, Vik Muniz’s life-size figures stand like totems of New York diversity at 72nd Street, and Jean Shin delved into photographic archives to remember the demolished elevated tracks at 63rd Street.

Among all the new vibrant art, mostly concentrated on the second mezzanine of each two-tiered station, Muniz’s crowd of “Perfect Strangers” is a standout. The incredibly detailed mosaic people include a costumed tiger with his head in hand, a Sikh fashionista, and a sunglass-sporting cop brandishing a popsicle. There are also two men holding hands, a couple that, the AP reports, represents the first known example of “a permanent, non-political LGBTQ public artwork in New York City.” (By contrast, George Segal’s sculptures in Christopher Park commemorate the Stonewall Riots, a political action.) Shin’s “Elevated” is also quite beautiful, with elegant mosaics based on early-20th-century photographs of the Second and Third Avenue elevated lines from the Transit Museum and New-York Historical Society archives. At the escalator entrance, the beams of the elevated tracks are pulled apart by cranes in a geometry of overlapping lines, representing the dismantling of the “El” in the 1940s.

View of the Second Avenue–96th Street station. The Latin words “E Pluribus Unum” (“out of many, one”) and “Excelsior” (“Ever Upward”) appear in the three new stations.
Although likely the most familiar, Close’s portraits really pop in the airy stations, and visitors on the first day were drawn to touch their intricate tile work. Two are, naturally, of himself, with others in the dozen featuring cultural figures such as Kara Walker, Cecily Brown, and a young Philip Glass hovering over the escalators. Lou Reed and Alex Katz glowering in grayscale might do little to brighten commuters’ moods, though. Sze’s blue and white mural of almost 4,300 porcelain tiles may be the least immediately accessible, yet also the most rewarding to see day after day, as its progression of white paper shapes collecting in corners and transforming into birds offers long-term visual discovery.

The Second Avenue line was first proposed back in 1929. It was derailed, so to speak, by the Great Depression and other hurdles, until it was revived as a plan in the 1990s to increase Upper East Side accessibility. The next phase will stretch up to 125th Street in Harlem, but that’s assuredly years away. For now, New Yorkers can enjoy the fleeting new subway smell in the four art-filled stations, before rats inevitably creep in and the spotless tiles are marred by the daily traffic of thousands of passengers.

Jean Shin: “Elevated”
Lexington Avenue–63rd Street station

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