

CRISTIN TIERNEY

**NEW YORK POST**



"Fairyqueen" dress, \$2,895 at [Temperley London](#); 18-k yellowgold ring with diamonds (model's right hand), \$4,795 at [Djula](#); Tiffany T 18-k rose-gold ring with pavé diamonds (model's left hand), \$6,900 at [Tiffany](#); "Grace" bag, \$3,000 at [Mark Cross](#)

## This fascinating new subway art is based on real New Yorkers

By [Marisa Mazria-Katz](#)

May 3, 2017 | 9:35am

To tell the story of how artist Vik Muniz and his exquisite murals came to bedeck the walls of the Second Avenue Subway's newly opened 72nd Street station, you must begin with the stunning way the native Brazilian first got himself to the United States.

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In 1982, a baby-faced Muniz was in Sao Paolo, decked out in a rented tuxedo after receiving an award for his advertising work (which is how he spent the first part of his career).

A fight erupted in front of him on the street. Muniz dove in to break it up. In the melee, he was shot in the leg. Rather than press charges against the perpetrator, Muniz asked for compensation — enough to swing an airline ticket to America.

Thirty five years later, at the age of 55, Muniz has become one of New York's most celebrated artists.

His sculptures and photographs — many of which recreate iconic images using everyday materials, like a peanut-butter-and-jelly “Mona Lisa” or a Che Guevara portrait made with black beans — have been collected by some of the biggest and most prestigious museums in the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and London's Victoria and Albert Museum. But Muniz's appeal goes far beyond galleries and curators.

In 2001, pedestrians walking the streets of Manhattan fell under the spell of his “Clouds” project, for which he orchestrated a crop-dusting plane to puff white smoke, drawing his images of clouds in the sky several times a day. His most recent public project, “Perfect Strangers,” is thankfully less ephemeral. Muniz — alongside artists Chuck Close, Sarah Sze and Jean Shin — was chosen (out of roughly 300 applicants) by the MTA Arts & Design program to transform one of the new Second Avenue Subway stations into a large-scale contemporary-art installation.

We selected his captivating work in the 72nd Street station as the backdrop for our Alexa cover shoot. As a decades-long rider of the subway, Muniz didn't have to look far for inspiration. “Subways here are not particularly grand like Moscow's, and they aren't exotic,” he explains to Alexa. “It is actually the people, the riders, that come up when the subway comes into conversation.”

And so Muniz turned to the many people who come in and out of his own daily life — including his Orthodox-Jewish accountant, his landlord, a local barista,

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and even fellow artist JR — to find subjects for the project. Muniz photographed each person, then worked with the specialized architectural glass and mosaic team at Franz Mayer of Munich to transform the images into intricate, laminated glass mosaics.

The fragments were affixed to the station's porcelain-tiled walls, creating compelling tableaux of those aforementioned perfect strangers. All in all, the project took more than four years to complete. Witnessing Muniz's murals emerge as you rise from the bowels of the subway is a remarkable experience.

Their glistening glass fragments create characters — their faces bored, bemused, agitated, maudlin — who mirror the millions of NYC subway riders waiting on a platform or scurrying through a station. On one wall, a young, blank-faced boy carries a stack of seven pizza boxes; nearby a man wears half a tiger costume — furry head in one hand and a plastic bag in the other.

The figures “look like an Egyptian sculpture in the Met, like they've been there for a long time,” the artist reflects. It's no surprise — in his work, the commonplace often becomes monumental.

Now all it takes to step into Muniz's singular world? A ride on the subway.