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New York City's Second Avenue Subway is a wonderland of public art

Rush hour has never been so culturally enriching.

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We've all been there: At the 72nd Street station on the soon-to-open Second Avenue line, mosaic artist Vik Muniz pays tribute to NYC straphangers in all of their bedraggled and bored glory. (Photo: [MTA/flickr](#))

The New York Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) pleased modern architecture admirers while also supplying sharp-tongued critics with a generous helping of fodder earlier this year when it debuted Santiago Calatrava's controversial and mega-costly World Trade Center transit hub. Now, starting Jan. 1, the MTA is giving contemporary art buffs and straphangers alike something to take in and talk about at a quartet of subway stations — three of them new and one expanded — on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

Together composing the first phase of the painfully long-awaited Second Avenue subway line, these four stations aren't themselves works of art like Calatrava's downtown transit hub, a soaring structure meant to evoke a bird in flight. However, the stations — 63rd

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Street, 72nd Street, 86th Street and 96th Street — *are* stuffed to the gills with enough detour-worthy public art to establish them as bona fide cultural attractions.

Cultural attractions — certainly a term you don't frequently hear in direct reference to New York City Subway stations, even though [more than a few](#) boast eye-catching works of public art.



'Elevated' by Jean Shin (Photo: [MTA/flickr](#))

Essentially, you could regard the Second Avenue Subway's art-adorned inaugural stations, heralded as the "largest permanent public art installation in New York history" by Gov. Andrew Cuomo, as subterranean mini-museums. But unlike their non-MTA-operated aboveground counterparts, these museums will eventually also be home to [pizza-lugging rats](#) and a [vast array of microbial life](#).

Each of the four stations, which are scheduled to be open to the public on Jan. 1 following considerable delay, is home to a major installation by a single esteemed artist: At 63rd Street is "Elevated," a sprawling work in which Jean Shin brings to life archival photographs taken of and on Manhattan's now-extinct elevated train lines with ceramic, glass and mosaic; the 72nd Street station is populated by "Perfect Strangers," a photo-based mosaic installation by Brazilian-born, Brooklyn-based artist Vik Muniz; rendered in mosaic and ceramic tile, "Subway Portraits" is the latest from celebrity photorealist Chuck Close and can be found beneath the intersection of 86th Street and 2nd Avenue; lastly, Sarah Sze's immersive "Blueprint for a Landscape" unfolds across the walls of the 96th Street station.

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Another angle of 'Elevated' by Jean Shin. (Photo: [MTA/flickr](#))

Shin, Muniz, Close and Sze were selected by the MTA from a pool of 300 noteworthy artists vying for a coveted gig that allowed them to treat the walls of four new subway stations as blank canvases.

While the installations at all four stations are remarkable in their own right, the Chuck Close installation at 86th Street will no doubt garner the most attention from out-of-towners and rubbernecking non-commuters considering that Close teeters into household name territory with his larger-than-life gridded portraits serving as crowd-drawing fixture at numerous major contemporary art museums across the world including New York's own Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. (The suggested/required adult admission price at both of these museums is \$25 while a single ride on the subway costs \$2.75).

What's more, Close's 12 "Subway Portraits," each measuring nearly nine feet high, depict a few of the artist's recognizable friends including musicians like the late Lou Reed and Philip Glass and artists Cindy Sherman, Kara Walker and Zhang Hua along with Close himself.

But it's the less familiar faces immortalized by Vik Muniz 14 blocks to the south at 72nd Street that are perhaps even more captivating or, at least, relatable.

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Spread out across the station's platforms and entrances, Muniz's rather perfect "Perfect Strangers" is made up of a motley crew of three-dozen life-sized characters who are waiting for the train to arrive — some more patiently than others. These faces wear the expressions of New York City subway riders: distracted, bored, bemused, bedraggled, annoyed, impatient, indifferent.

These colorful everyday "real" New Yorkers — in actuality, the highly detailed mosaics are based on staged portraits of Muniz's New York-dwelling friends who agreed to play dress up and pose — come in all shapes and sizes and colors: a subway saxophonist, an off-duty [furry](#) in a tiger costume, a child grasping for a balloon, a popsicle-wielding cop and a hand-holding gay couple.

The latter mosaic, depicting husbands Thor Stockman and Patrick Kellogg, is believed to be the first permanent, non-political LGBTQ artwork in New York City. "They are just people you would expect to see," Muniz, a lauded multimedia artist best known for socially conscious works that [incorporate rubbish](#) plucked from the sprawling landfills of Rio de Janeiro, explains to the [AP](#). "You would expect to see men holding hands."

"In the subway you really don't end up remembering anything but the people," Muniz tells the [New York Times](#). "You remember the characters, and you make up stories about them."

Again, the works of Muniz, Close, Shin and Sze will be on full view for the MetroCard-swiping masses on Jan. 1 when Phase 1 of the Second Avenue Subway opens for business as promised after nearly 10 years of construction and over 90 years on the drawing board. It's estimated that 200,000 commuters will use the new line each day and reduce crowding on the neighboring Lexington Avenue Line by as much as 23 percent.

Says, Cuomo, who is described by the Times as having "taken a unusually personal role" in the homestretch leading up to the Second Avenue Subway's opening, in a [statement](#):

The Second Avenue subway provides New Yorkers with a museum underground and honors our legacy of building engineering marvels that elevate the human experience. Public works projects are not just about function — they're an expression of who we are and what we believe. Any child who has never walked into a museum or an art gallery can walk the streets of New York and be exposed to art and education simply by being a New Yorker. That is where we came from and that is what makes New York special.

Commissioned by the MTA Arts & Design public art program, the four art installations carved \$4.5 million out of the agency's \$4.45 billion overall budget for Phase 1 of the forever-in-the-making subway line — that's a little over \$1 million per station. Seems like a small price to pay to bring world-class public art to that important space beneath the city streets.