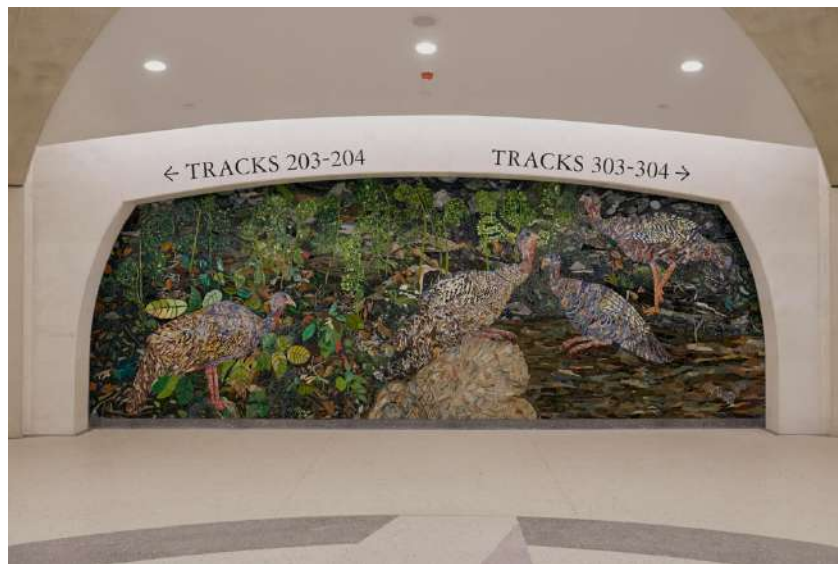


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NOW ARRIVING: YAYOI KUSAMA AND KIKI SMITH'S GRAND CENTRAL MADISON MOSAICS

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"The Spring," a mosaic by the artist Kiki Smith in the new Grand Central Madison station. Credit: Vincent Tullo

As workers busily finished construction of the brand-new train station Grand Central Madison in November, the artist Kiki Smith was standing in front of her new mosaic "River Light," an abstracted, blue-and-white depiction of glinting sunshine on the East River.

"I've never made a mosaic before," she said, pausing to touch the varied surfaces of the small and colorful glass pieces making up the composition. She added, "I've also never made anything so big in my life."

The 80-foot-long work is on the Madison Concourse level of Grand Central Madison, the 700,000-square-foot, \$11.1 billion Long Island Rail Road terminal, set to open in December. The terminal is the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's largest project yet.



Kiki Smith, Credit: Vincent Tullo

At a time of increased concerns over safety, and with subway ridership still recovering, some may question the M.T.A. spending money on art, though the art program's cost, \$1.4 million, is only .01 percent of the terminal's total budget.

Rachael Fauss, a senior policy adviser for the watchdog group Reinvent Albany, said that while she did not object to the art program per se, it was "part of a larger problem of having unique, expensive stations," versus the more cost-conscious route of standardization. "When it's more about the looks than the function, and it's across the whole system, that adds up over time," Fauss said.

Organized by M.T.A. Arts & Design, the commissioned art at Grand Central Madison includes photography by Paul Pfeiffer, the first installment of a rotating lightbox exhibition programmed in partnership with the International Center of Photography. In addition, five large LED screens will show digital works by Gabriel Barcia-Colombo, Jordan Bruner and Red Nose Studio, which focuses on 3-D illustration and animation.

Those passing through the terminal will also encounter four other glass mosaics by Smith, and a 120-foot-long one by the artist Yayoi Kusama.

Thematically, Smith's works all reference nature, with a particular nod to the flora and fauna of Long Island — the wild turkeys depicted in her mosaic "The Spring" are poised to become a commuter favorite — and the digital and photographic works all depict some aspect of city life, in all its bustling and eccentric glory.

Smith has never relied on intense hues to make an impact with her work, and this project pushed her in a new direction, as seen in the bits of yellow, blue and red that make up the turkeys. "This was a way to engage with color," she said.



Yayoi Kusama: "A Message of Love, Directly from My Heart unto the Universe." Credit: Yayoi Kusama, via Ota Fine Arts and David Zwirner; Photo by Kerry McFate

Kusama, now living in Tokyo, was a New Yorker from 1958 to 1975. Her 120-foot-long mosaic — "A Message of Love, Directly from My Heart unto the Universe" (2022), also located in the Madison Concourse — epitomizes her signature recent workstyle, in an ebullient Pop-inflected work that has brought her intense late-career fame, at the age of 93.

An extension of her surreal and humorous "My Eternal Soul" series of paintings and immersive rooms, the vibrantly multicolored composition depicts a fanciful cosmic party of sorts, with sun-like smiling faces floating alongside amoeba-like shapes, one of her now-familiar pumpkins and a mix of abstract forms.

Kusama said in an email that the train station venue inspired her to depict many different characters coming and going.

"It could be you, it could be me," she said.

Kusama added that she recalls taking the subway all over New York, especially to the library, museums and the theater.

Public transit was also the setting for at least one of her groundbreaking "happenings," as public art interventions were called.

"I once had a nude happening at a subway station," Kusama said, referring to the last iteration of her "Anatomic Explosions" series, in November 1968. "The police came immediately, so it was only a few minutes and I left with the dancers, but that was a spectacle."



The artist Gabriel Barcia-Colombo put out a casting call for some of the participants, and found others on the street, for his video work in the new terminal, titled "Platform." Credit: Gabriel Barcia-Colombo

A committee of arts professionals and transit authority staffers picked Smith and Kusama in 2020, after a call for portfolios. "It was a highly competitive process," said Sandra Bloodworth, the director of M.T.A. Arts & Design. There were seven finalists, and the women who were chosen made proposals that were very close to the finished designs. In the past, both artists have made much more provocative and button-pushing works than their Grand Central Madison pieces, which Bloodworth said reflected a savvy approach on their parts.

"Artists are smart," she said. "When they come into the public realm, they're aware of what works in that environment."

An only-in-New-York sensibility infuses Pfeiffer's 10 photographs, a series called "Still Life," which depict the Times Square street performer Da Gold Man (real name: Travis Hartfield), known for holding motionless poses and being covered in gold paint.

"I wanted to do something that reflects the environment in which these images appear," Pfeiffer said.

He described the result, photographed in a studio, as a cross between a fashion shoot and a still life work.

"I use my commission to amplify his performance," Pfeiffer said of Hartfield. "It was a collaboration with him."

The locals are more animated in Barcia-Colombo's five-channel video work, "Platform," featuring 40 New Yorkers moving in slow motion. He put out a casting call on social media for some of the participants, and found others on the street.

“We’ve been so isolated in the pandemic,” Barcia-Colombo said. “This is about being in a crowd again.”

Barcia-Colombo added that a digital component was a good complement to the medium of mosaics, New York’s traditional go-to for public transit art.

“Digital art is the future of public art,” he said. “All these stations have screens in them. It’s an entry point for people.”

With her five works, Smith has the biggest footprint in the project. She said that “River Light” was inspired by the commuting trip.

“People are going under the East River to get here and back,” she said. “You’re making a journey through water.” The patterns seem to form starbursts in some places, which she said nicely echoed the famed “sky ceiling” of Grand Central Station.

One level below Madison Concourse, on the Long Island Rail Road Mezzanine, are her other four works, all occupying arched alcoves: “The Water’s Way,” a rocky beach scene; “The Presence,” a landscape with a lone deer; “The Spring,” with four turkey amid lush vegetation; and “The Sound” a seascape with a large gull.

“I wanted places for people to say, ‘Meet you by the deer,’” Smith said. “Something distinct.”

Smith was raised in New Jersey and became a New Yorker in 1976; now she spends much of her time at a home in the Hudson Valley. Early in her career she became known for her figural works, particularly those depicting the female body, and moved over time to using nature as a springboard for her art.

She based all her mosaics on previous work. “River Light” was first a photograph, and then a cyanotype, but it looks very different in its mosaic incarnation.

“I use a lot of the same images over and over again,” Smith said. “And then I change the materials or the scale.”

Then came a process that took the better part of two years, a complicated back-and-forth to turn her ideas into small pieces of glass.

First, Smith sent her original artworks to a specialty studio with whom she has collaborated in the past on making tapestries, Magnolia Editions, in Oakland, Calif. That stage helped her get disparate images into one large composition.

Smith worked with a respected mosaic specialist founded in the 19th century, the German firm Franz Mayer of Munich. (Kusama and her studio worked with Miotto Mosaic Art Studios of Carmel, N.Y.)

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Smith, who went to Munich four times for the Grand Central Madison project, and previously worked with Mayer on making stained glass, had to get used to giving up some control. Mayer's artisans are the ones who break down her composition into its small component pieces.

"The first time I did it, I had such an anxiety attack," Smith said. "In general I make my own work."

She added, "That's the thing about mosaics — it's a relationship of trust."

Just as Kusama's work celebrates the diverse population that comes together in a train station, Smith has a reverence for the way art and architecture can elevate civic life.

That was imbued by her father, the noted sculptor Tony Smith (1912–1980), particularly when he took the family on a pilgrimage of sorts in 1963.

"My father took me, my sisters and my mother to Penn Station, before it was torn down," Smith recalled of the now-infamous three-year demolition of the 1910 Beaux-Arts landmark designed by McKim, Mead & White. Smith was 9 years old at the time.

As she got ready to uncover her contribution to a major new chapter in the story of the city's infrastructure, she recalled that her father's reaction "made a big impression on me."

"He was weeping and weeping," Smith said.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/30/arts/design/grand-central-madison-kiki-smith-yayoi-kusama.html>