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Art

Katherine Bradford Mosaic Murals Make a Manhattan Subway Station Shine

You don't need a train ticket to see the five glass mosaic murals by Bradford at the L train First Avenue stop.



by Valentina Di Liscia
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One of Katherine Bradford's five murals at the First Avenue L Station in New York City (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

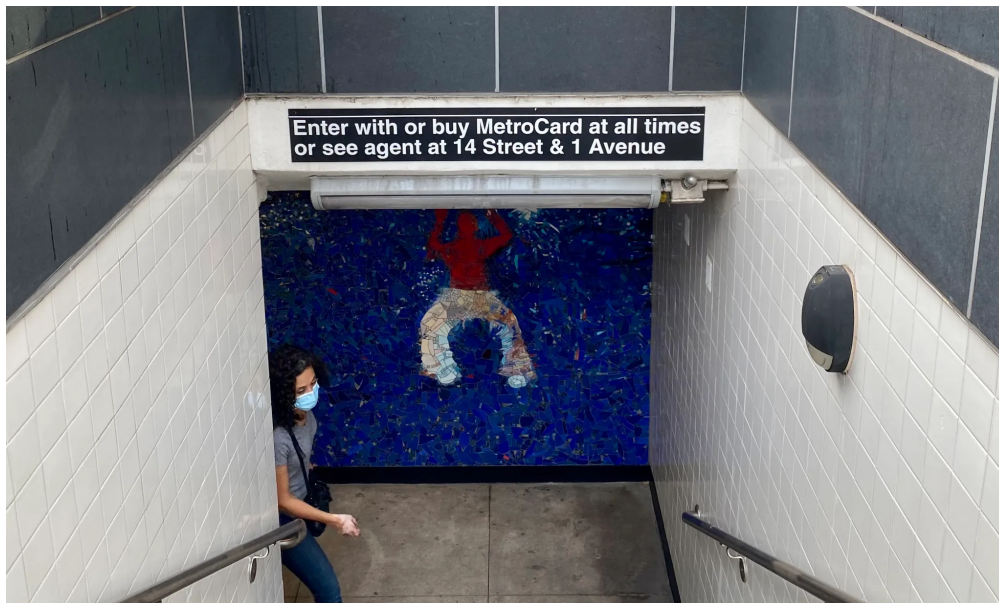
New York City subway stations can be drab places. But over the years, artists have helped transform their cavelike, musty interiors into subterranean museums: there's Faith Ringgold's kaleidoscopic tribute to "**Harlem Heroes and Heroines**" at the 125th Street stop; a Sam Gilliam **relief sculpture** at the final stop on the E, J, and Z lines; and countless **unsanctioned interventions** that spring up while the MTA attendants aren't looking.

The latest to join them is Katherine Bradford, a New York native best known for her meditative, uncanny paintings of floating figures, swimmers, and dancers in nocturnal or Day-Glo colorscapes. Across five glass mosaic murals now installed at the L train First Avenue station in Manhattan, her distinctively whimsical characters give a mirthful welcome to riders at the subway's entrances, impossible to ignore even during the busiest of rush hours.



One of the murals from the pair "Superhero Responds" (2021) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

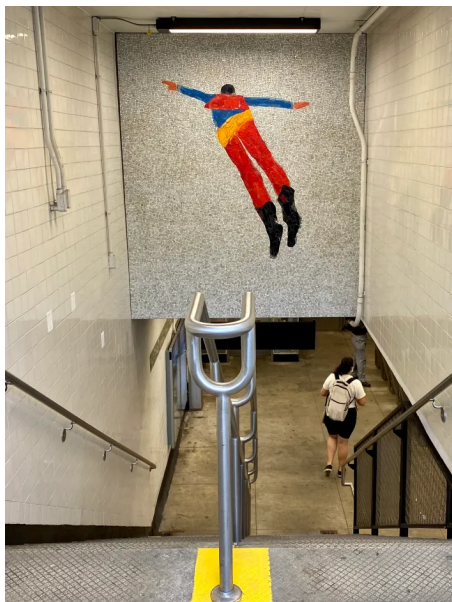
Commissioned by the MTA Arts & Design and fabricated by Mayer of Munich, they were officially unveiled today along with a group of murals by artist Marcel Dzama at the recently refurbished Bedford Avenue subway station in Brooklyn. The L line, beleaguered by storm damages and expensive repairs, nevertheless has special significance for Bradford, who has kept a painting studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, for decades.



Some of Bradford's murals can even be seen without entering the station. (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

"Once someone steps into the subway area, we become travelers, and my hope is that these artworks will transport you to another place," she said during a press event this morning.

"There's a man in ball gown in a beautiful garden of white flowers. Something to think about when you go to your office, perhaps," Bradford continued. "And then in the stairways I have superheroes flying through the air to guide all of us travelers to where we might want to go, and to guide our thoughts, too."



The superheroes "guide all of us travelers to where we might want to go," the artist says. (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Visitors can admire Bradford's works without riding the train — or buying a ticket. Her three larger murals, collectively titled "Queens of the Night," are installed in different areas underground near the Metrocard vending machines. A pair of works, "Superhero Responds," hover right above the stairs at two of the subway's entrances; passersby can even catch a small glimpse from the street level.

"Everyone likes them, and I like them too," said an MTA attendant working

at the First Avenue stop.

She is stationed at a booth near one of the sprawling murals from “Queens of the Night” that depicts individual figures in dancelike poses against a sapphire blue background dotted with cosmic elements.



One of the larger mosaics features several dancing figures near the MTA ticket machines. (courtesy © Katherine Bradford; photo by Jason Mandella)

“The way they’ve put it together, using all these tiny pieces, it looks like a real moon is there, a real sky,” she adds. “It’s so pretty.”

Bradford’s permanent installation can be viewed at the L train station at the intersection of First Avenue and East 14th Street in Manhattan.

