REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Hidden Art: A Rhapsody for the Soul, in 10 City Corners

A Baedeker for adventurers yearning for the unknown, the unnoticed and the unexpected on a walk around New York City.

A second-floor windowsill provides an unlikely perch for this sculpture from the series "Dwellings" by Charles Simonds, known for his tiny clay constructions tucked into buildings and crevices since the 1970s. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

By Eric V. Copage

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When I emerge from an art gallery or a museum, the world around me looks different. Leaving the Metropolitan Museum of Art late one afternoon, the color of the sunlight is amplified by my memory of the luminous gold in a peacock's tail rendered in a Japanese painting. Tire scuff marks on a curb near the Museum of Modern Art seem to recall the numinous power of Mark Rothko's untitled black on gray painting.

It's not only deliberate encounters with art that I find transformative. In fact, the more random, the better. I love walking in New York because it encourages me to startle myself. I recently got lost in the warren of passages in the 34th Street-Herald Square subway station and stumbled upon a horizontal row of mobiles — 14 paired red, nearly five-foot-wide paddles balanced on metal poles stretching over what would be the top of the trains. When I got home, I Googled and found I had encountered "Yab-Yum," a 1992 artwork by David Provan whose "wind paddles" were meant to dip and sway to the

underground zephyrs of approaching and departing trains. By the time I saw the work, it was worse for wear — static and encrusted with grime. Even so, I was as excited as I imagined an archaeologist would be upon discovering a corroded brooch from a long-forgotten burial mound.

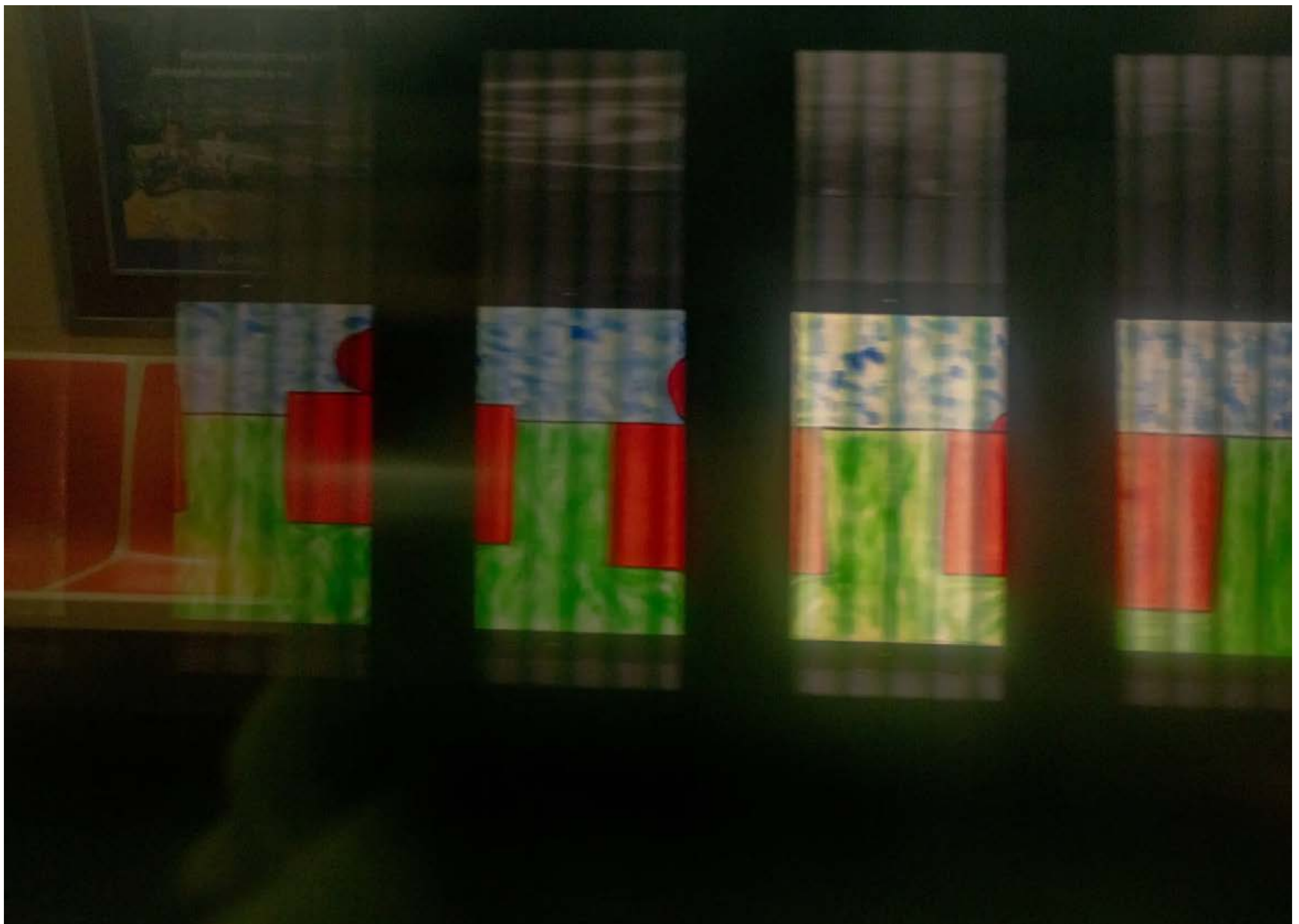
I'll avoid debates about what is art and what is not. I'm not a professional critic. For argument's sake, let's say art is in the jangly intersection of intent and reception. The dozens of art experts I spoke to all had their pet works, as I assume Lori Zimmer and Maria Krasinski did in their book "Art Hiding in New York: An Illustrated Guide to the City's Secret Masterpieces" (Running Press, 2020).

What I'm offering is my personal Baedeker of art hidden in plain sight as they continue to tickle me. For instance, the anarchic overgrowth of vegetation at LaGuardia Place and West Houston Street called "Time Landscape." It's an ongoing work meant to recall the precolonial flora of New York City, and was started in 1978 by Alan Sonfist, an environmental artist. There is also the startling image of a worker in a hard hat. He's located on a wall outside an elevator shaft at the southeast entrance of the subway station at 72nd Street and Second Avenue. His back turned, he is frozen in the middle of some task while on his ladder. Commuters can glimpse the mosaic — which at first seems like it is a real person — through the glass of the elevator as they ride between the street and Q train levels. (The worker is part of a station-wide work, "Perfect Strangers," designed in 2017 by Vik Muniz.)

My curated guide is for adventurers yearning for the unknown, the unnoticed, and the unexpected. If you've discovered something aesthetically intriguing — whether or not it is "art" — we urge you to share it online in the comments section.

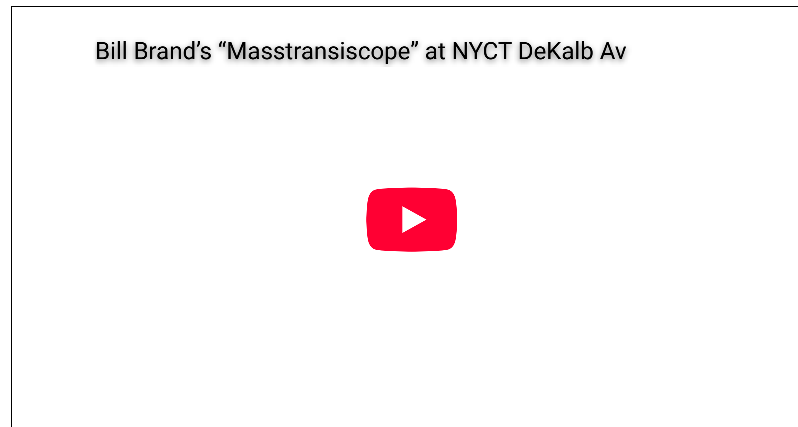
1. B or Q subway, traveling from DeKalb Avenue to Manhattan

"Masstransiscope" (1980), Bill Brand



In Bill Brand's 1980 work, "Masstransicope," playful animated shapes provide two bursts of color along the subway ride from DeKalb station toward the Manhattan Bridge. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

If you're on the B or Q lines between the DeKalb stop and the Manhattan Bridge, you'll notice two brief, unexpected bursts of primary school colors on the tunnel wall. You're rolling past "Masstransiscope," an installation created in 1980 by Bill Brand. The piece consists of a 300-foot-long enclosure in an abandoned subway tunnel that runs parallel for a ways to a working tunnel. The enclosure has 228 narrow slots. On its backside, fluorescent lights illuminate a series of panels hand-painted in primary colors on a white background. Each panel depicts one stage of a process — the unfolding of a box, a rocket ship blasting off, and whimsical abstract moving patterns. When viewed from a moving train, they look like a continuous animation.



Brand was a young experimental filmmaker when he created the piece, "which means I have an audience of 100," he said in a short video by the Museum of the City of New York. "So I proposed the 'Masstransitscope' project as a way to challenge myself and say, what would it be like to have a large audience?"

He received a rush of publicity, but the work was vandalized and shut down. Most recently in 2013, with the help of the M.T.A., it was restored and reinstalled. "Because it's been around for so long, it's part of people's childhood," he said on his website. "I like to say it's everyone's secret."

2. Lobby, Manhattan side of the Staten Island Ferry Terminal

"Whitehall Crossing" (2005), Ming Fay

By sitting on Ming Fay's "Whitehall Crossing," which arches across the lobby of the Staten Island Ferry Terminal in Manhattan, ferrygoers become an ever-changing part of the sculpture. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

Entering the vast lobby on the Manhattan side of the Staten Island Ferry Terminal, I was greeted by 28 sections of rounded granite benches in three unequal rows. They seemed to arc weightlessly over the undulating design of the terrazzo floor.

To my eye, the work resembles giant sea serpents — eels, perhaps. But in an email exchange with its creator, Ming Fay, a Manhattan-based sculptor and installation artist, I learned Fay's inspiration came from the "shape and function of the dugout canoes used by Native Americans in the early crossings between Manhattan and Staten Island."

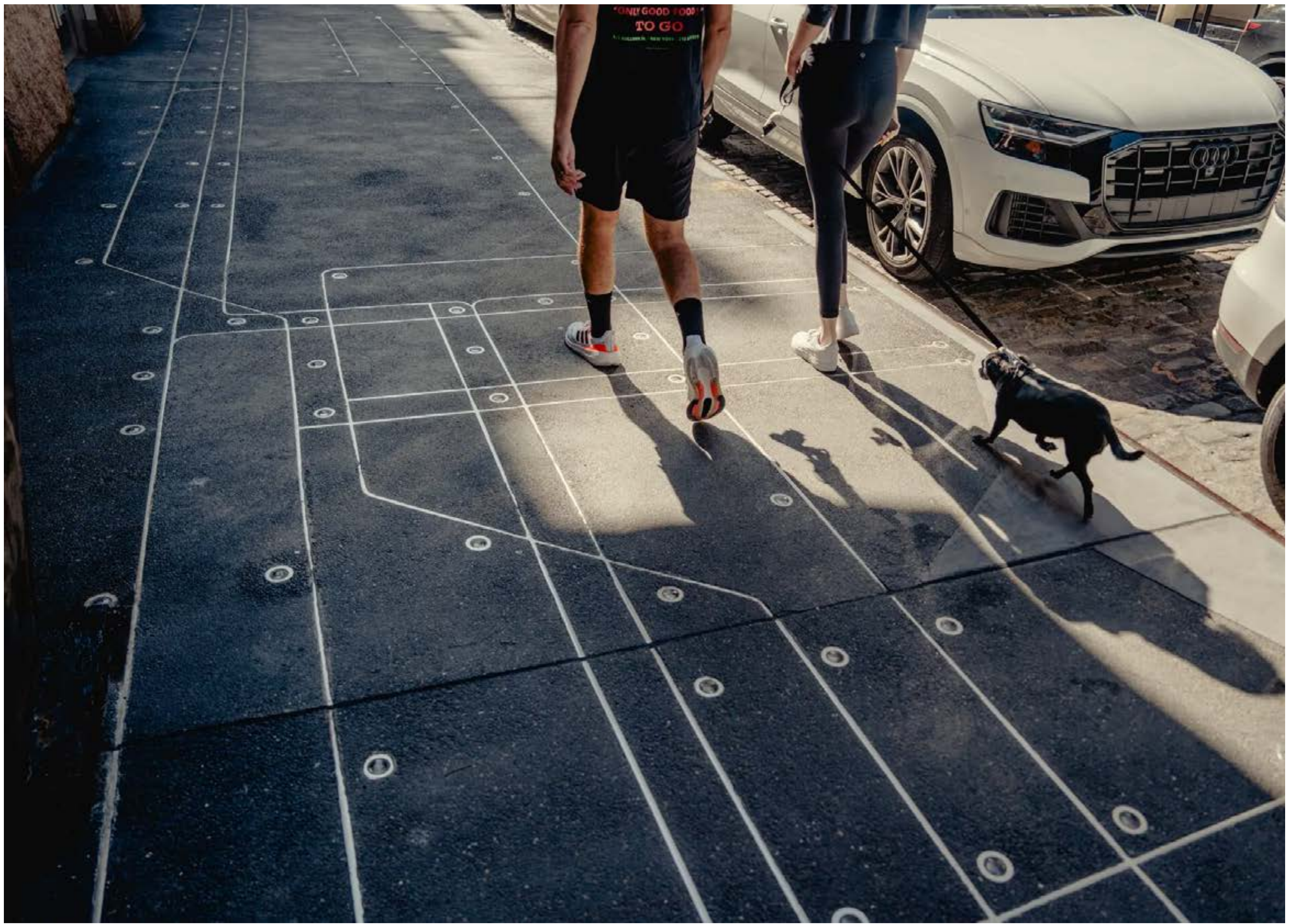
He said he chose granite because of its "natural, timeless beauty" and because it is well-adapted for functional public art.

"Granite is extremely durable and easy to care for, including being highly stain resistant when sealed properly," said Fay, whose other public works include "Shad Crossing, Delancey Orchard" at the Delancey and Essex Street subway station.

When he begins commissions, Fay said he immerses himself in a site's historical background and environment. "In the lobby of this modern waiting room, there are moments where the space is almost empty with people and then full again," he said. "Whitehall Crossing is often invisible to the ferry goer who, through sitting on the sculpture, engages with and thus becomes a part of the artwork."

3. 110 Greene Street between Prince and Spring Streets

"Subway Map Floating on a New York Sidewalk" (1985), Françoise Schein



To symbolize New York's vitality, Françoise Schein, a Belgium artist and architect, designed a 90-by-12-foot stylized replica of a subway map and embedded it in a sidewalk in SoHo. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

Françoise Schein, an architect and artist from Belgium, was new to New York City in the mid-1980s when she became besotted with the subways, graffitied though they were. She was also struck by the design of circuit boards for then-newfangled personal computers and by aerial views of the grid of Manhattan streets. To Schein, they all represented dynamic movement.

Schein, then 27, was living in SoHo, a formerly down-at-the-heels manufacturing district. One day she happened to bump into Tony Goldman, a 34-year-old real estate developer purchasing property in the neighborhood. He mentioned he would like to commission a piece for the sidewalk in front of a property at 110 Greene Street.

Schein thought about her three design obsessions and distilled them into one iconic image: a subway map (circa 1985) of Manhattan, albeit one that is reversed (north is south) and slightly stylized because she combined Manhattan subway lines to get the map to fit on the allotted space.

“I was fascinated by the subway,” Schein said in a recent phone interview. “It was an amazing design. The subway is a map of the mobility in New York. This mobility makes the city function.”

Getting government permissions for Schein's first public art didn't come easy. She and Goldman endured months of New York's finest bureaucracy but finally received the requisite OKs.

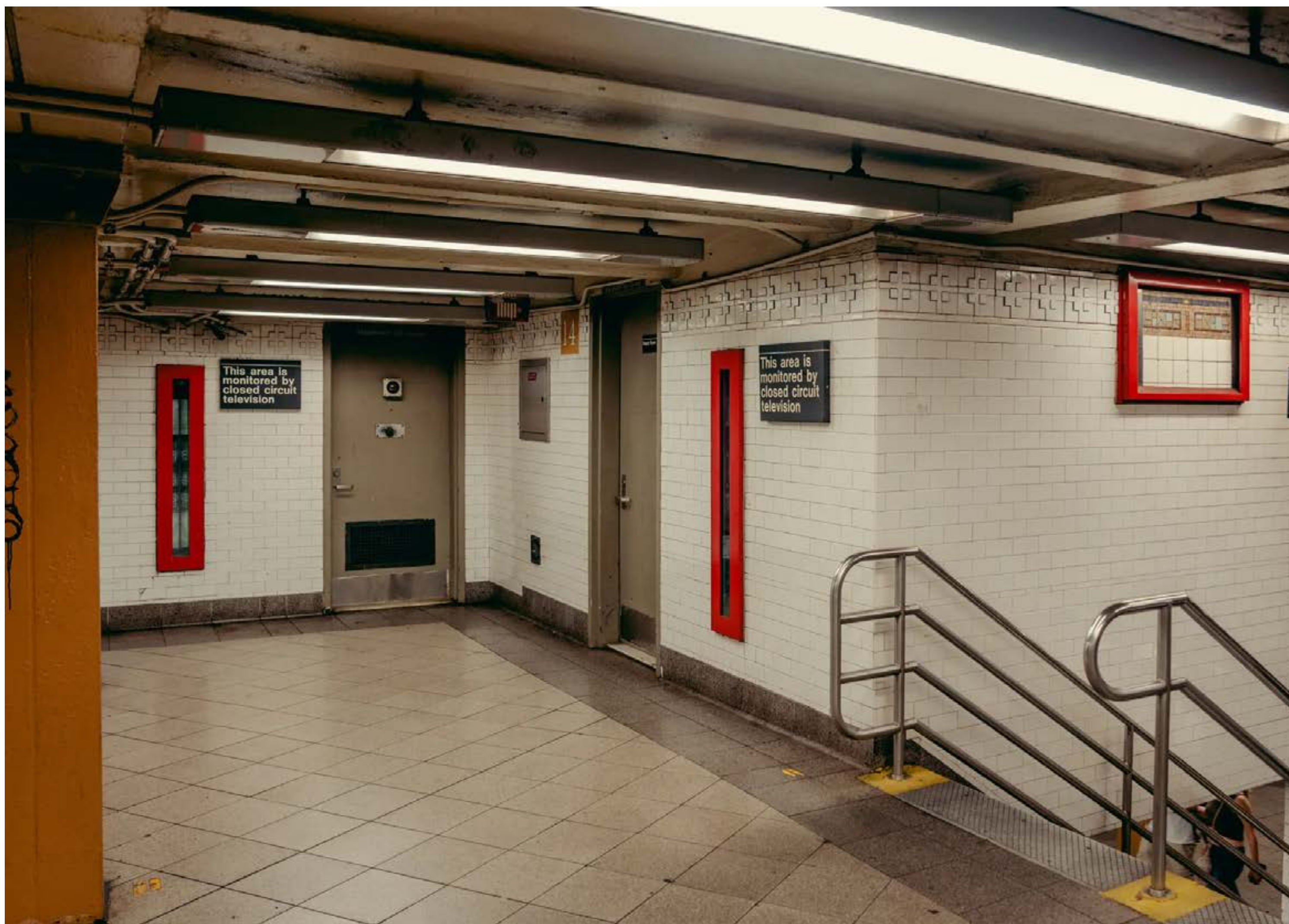
The 90 foot-long, 12-foot-wide work is embedded into the sidewalk. Train routes are created using stainless steel, iron and washed terrazzo, echoing the materials used for trains and the subway system. Some 156 discs of glass are eerily illuminated from below at night. They correspond to the relative positions of real train stops.

Schein sourced the glass components from cellars underneath buildings in the Cast Iron District.

"It needed to be part of the neighborhood of SoHo," she said, "not like an art piece that was coming from the moon."

4. Union Square subway station

"Framing Union Square" (2000), Mary Miss



In "Framing Union Square," Mary Miss formalized the inspiration she drew from the red spray paint workers used to mark parts of the subway station during its renovation in the late 1990s. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

I'd frequented the Union Square subway station hundreds of times over the years yet had barely noticed the glossy fire-engine-red frames and frame fragments set along the walls of its passageways, bridges and platforms. Some surrounded slots — when you peered in, you might see a mirrored box containing images of the station before its renovation. Other frames highlighted aspects of the station's earlier incarnations, like the 100-year-old patterned mosaic beside a stairway descending to the downtown Broadway line.

When Mary Miss, a Manhattan-based artist, was commissioned to work with the architect Lee Harris Pomeroy on the renovation, she struggled to create a coherent project for one of the city's most complex stations, with 12 entrances leading to three different train lines. To kick-start her imagination, she revisited her earlier work that incorporated narrow openings in walls into obscured interiors, using mirrors aligned to create endless reflections of the viewer.

Then inspiration struck in the form of spray paint. Throughout the station, "red lines were spray painted on walls around places or objects in disrepair," Miss said in a video about her work on her website. The chance repetition was the unifying element Miss sought.

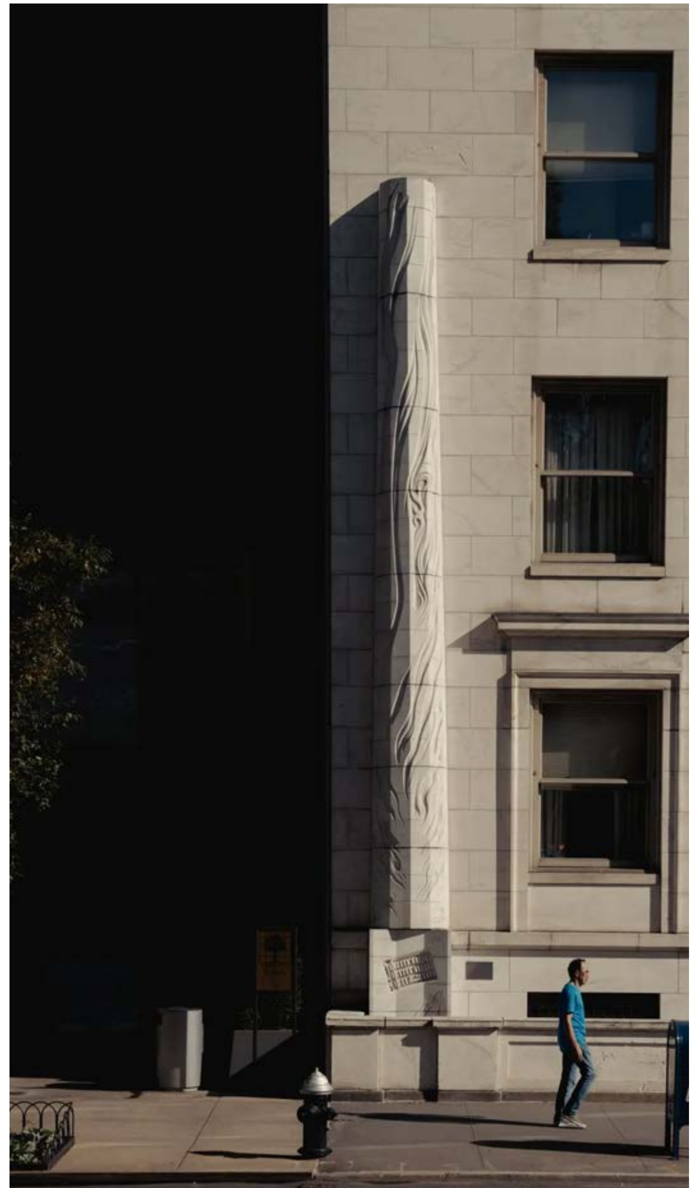
She framed 125 features throughout the station — stairs, lighting fixtures, mosaic tiles and turnstiles. “The project emerged out of this idea of red lining the station to expose its archaeology,” said Miss, the founder and director of City as Living Laboratory, or CALL, a nonprofit that collaborates on environmental issues with artists, scientists and community residents.

“As an artist, my interest is in getting people to see things they may not have noticed before,” she said. “I tried to take elements of the surroundings and bring them into focus.”

5. Madison Avenue between 25th and 26th Streets

“The Holocaust Memorial” (1990), Harriet Feigenbaum

“The Holocaust Memorial” (1990), carved into a marble corner of a court building by the sculptor Harriet Feigenbaum. It features a chimney of flame and an aerial view of Auschwitz. Amir Hamja/The New York Times


The piece’s message: Let past atrocities remind us to be vigilant about those today. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

A stylized chimney of flames rises unobtrusively from “The Holocaust Memorial,” which is carved into a Carrara marble column on a corner of the Appellate Court on the northeast corner of Madison Avenue at 26th Street. The flames blend in with the pale stone, as does an aerial view of Auschwitz carved in high-relief at eye level.

Harriet Feigenbaum, its sculptor, said she drew inspiration from the massive 51-foot-tall obelisk and bronze-relief memorial to Gen. William Jenkins Worth at East 25th Street between Broadway and Fifth Avenue just west of Madison Square Park. He was an officer during three conflicts — the War of 1812, the Second Seminole War and the Mexican American War.

“I wanted to do a traditional type of memorial because I thought it would work best for the subject and the location,” said Feigenbaum, who was chosen in 1988, by the Department of Cultural Affairs. Members from 35 New York law firms funded and oversaw the creation of the Holocaust memorial.

“Traditionally, there’s a lower and an upper column, and there’s a relief at eye level,” she said. “But usually, you don’t expect to see an image of Auschwitz.” Her image came from a still from a film made during a bombing raid of a Nazi factory. It happened to also capture frames of Auschwitz, the concentration camp in German-occupied Poland. Feigenbaum enlarged the photo and created a version of it in marble.

As in the original photograph, Feigenbaum identified the penal block, the execution wall, the gas chamber, the crematory and the commandant’s house.

“I want people to get upset when they see it,” she said. “I want to be upset that this happened to people, that government could get away with this. And it’s happened again, several times, in Cambodia and so on, all around the world. All you have to do is look.”

6. West 22nd Street between 10th and 11th Avenues

“7000 Oaks” (1988), Joseph Beuys

This tree and stone, with 38 similar pairs along a street in Chelsea, are part of a worldwide project by Joseph Beuys — his meditation on how different natural elements change in relation to each. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

Gazing westward on a quiet street in Chelsea reveals a view of the future and the past. A total of 38 trees line both sides of 22nd Street between 10th and 11th Avenues. Each is paired with a hip-high block of rough-hewed basalt.

It's part of a continuing project of Joseph Beuys, one of the seminal artists of the 20th century. He began his project, "7000 Oaks," in 1982, in Kassel, West Germany. Beuys, who died in 1986, planted a young oak tree and a four-foot block of basalt. The idea was to juxtapose and contrast how two elements of nature change in relation to one another.

In the brochure for his project, he wrote, "At the beginning, when we have 6- or 7-year-old oak trees, the basalt columns almost dominate them. After a couple of years, an equilibrium between the basalt and the tree will be reached, and after, say, 20 or 30 years, we will perhaps see the stone gradually turning into a subsidiary structure at the foot of the oak or other respective tree."

Over the next five years, he planted other living trees coupled with stones in other locations — Baltimore, Minneapolis, Oslo and Sydney, according to Matilde Guidelli-Guidi, curator and co-department head of Dia Art Foundation.

In 1988, Beuys's idea took root in New York when Dia planted five trees, each coupled with a modest monolith, outside 548 West 22nd Street. In 1996 Dia extended the Beuys installation, planting 25 new trees paired with a basalt stone along West 22nd Street while adding seven stones next to pre-existing trees. In 2020–21, one more pair was added, bringing the total to 38.

They chose hardy trees — including common hackberry, ginkgo, Japanese pagoda, pin oak and sycamore — that could survive urban pollution and complement city trees.

"Beuys intended for the Kassel initiative to be the first stage in an ongoing project to plant trees throughout the world," Guidelli-Guidi said. "It was part of a global mission to spark environmental and social change."

7. 34th Street-Herald Square subway station (N/Q/R/W)

"Reach New York, An Urban Musical Instrument," (1995), Christopher Janney

Some straphangers are surprised by the shower of tintinnabulation when they approach Christopher

Janney's "Reach New York." Others deliberately trigger the sound sculpture. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

Every time I'm in the Broadway line at the Herald Square station, I'm tickled to see straphangers' reactions to "Reach" — a pair of 24/7 interactive sound sculptures suspended over a portion of the uptown and downtown platforms. Each 30-foot-long forest green "urban musical instrument" is motion-activated, although after 10 minutes of inactivity, it will spontaneously sprinkle a few seconds of sound. This catches some subway riders unaware. They look around to see where the marimba-like sounds and chirping crickets are coming from. Some try to trigger sounds by moving their hands in front of one of the 16 sensors that stud each installation. Others approach the installation, hand raised as if greeting a good friend with a familiar "high five."

Christopher Janney, trained as an architect and a jazz musician, created the work and has done similar projects in open settings.

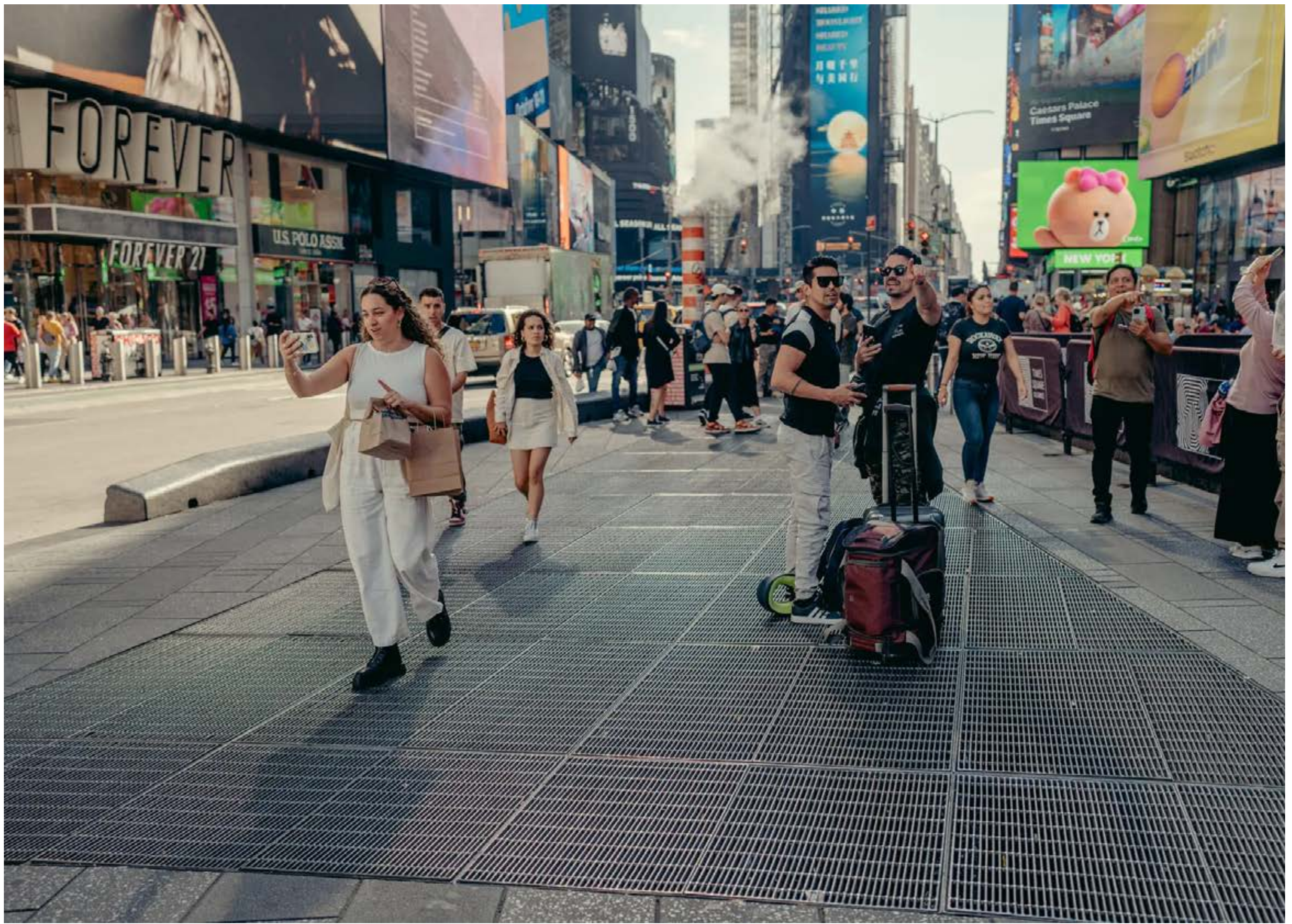
"The thing that always intrigued me about being down on subways is, you're in a totally man-made environment," Janney said. "So wouldn't it be cool if we made a sound piece composed of all natural sound, so that your eyes are telling you you're in one place, but your ears are telling you you're in another?"

He regularly taps into global banks of natural environmental sounds and animals at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at Cornell University.

"I start there," he said. "There are a lot of sounds from the rainforest. There are different kinds of birds and crickets, and frogs. And that's mixed with flutes and marimbas — soothing sounds that, hopefully, give you a sense of relaxation in an otherwise high-anxiety space."

8. Broadway between 46th and 45th Streets

"Times Square" (1977-1992; 2002-present), Max Neuhaus



Passers-by stand above the unmarked grate from which rises the subtle but unearthly moan of Max Neuhaus's sound sculpture, "Times Square." Amir Hamja/The New York Times

What attracts me to this piece is its anonymity. No bells, no whistles. Not even a whispered "atta boy" on a discreetly placed plaque. If not for the internet, Max Neuhaus's aural sculpture "Times Square" might even be considered an urban legend. What could make this unearthly drone rise from beneath the subway grate — a group of aging Buddhist monks chanting for a better afterlife? City machinery groaning away to keep the trains running?

The enigmatic aspect of the piece was at Neuhaus's insistence. "For those who find and accept the sound's impossibility," he wrote, "the island becomes a different place."

Neuhaus, who died in 2009, was known for his immersive and environmental sound works. He described the sounds of his installations as "plausible." In the case of "Times Square," the drone invites passers-by "to reflect on what is customary to an urban environment and what is mutable."

In 1977, after clearing numerous regulatory and logistical hurdles, Neuhaus climbed into a ventilation shaft beneath a street grate on the busy pedestrian island and installed a loudspeaker and homemade electronic sound generators.

In 1992, he shut down the piece because his artistic commitments in Europe prevented him from maintaining his work properly. But in 2002, a coalition of individuals, city agencies and leaders in the art world brought it back to life. In relaunching the project, Neuhaus amplified its volume to account for the area's increased noise.

"I wanted a work that wouldn't need indoctrination," the artist said. "The whole idea is that people discover it for themselves. They can't explain it. They take possession of it as their own discovery."

9. 49th Street between 2nd and 3rd Avenues

Amster Yard/Instituto Cervantes courtyard (check for hours)
“The Trees Are Watching” (2022), Martin & Muñoz

One of five trees in the courtyard of the Instituto Cervantes that return the gaze of onlookers in this anthropomorphic vision of nature by the artists Martin & Muñoz. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

Over the centuries, much has been made about the gaze in portraiture — the defiant gaze of an 18th-century English aristocrat, the averted gaze of a servant, the coy gaze of a young man or woman.

Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz, art collaborators married to each other and known professionally as Martin & Muñoz, have created an arboreal gaze. Five handcrafted glass eyes they purchased online from Germany look out from five trees in the Instituto Cervantes’s courtyard. All you have to do is find them.

“When we introduce people to the eyes, we usually walk them to the site and then just ask them to look and see what they find without giving them any other clues,” Martin said. “Surprise is so important.”

“Sometimes someone has been looking at an eye for a long time without realizing it’s there staring back at them,” he said. “When they do see it, it startles them.”

“It’s a light piece, it’s playful, it’s a discovery,” Muñoz said.

The couple had used eyes as a motif in their work before, at shows at PPOW, the art gallery in Manhattan, and Museum der Moderne Salzburg, in Austria. But the idea of incorporating them with trees came in 2020. Because of the Covid pandemic, the couple were isolated on their property in Pennsylvania near the Delaware Water Gap for six months.

“We would walk miles every day, never seeing anyone,” Martin said. “I think in the absence of people, we began to feel more of a kinship with the trees.”

Martin began making a series of pen and ink drawings of trees with eyes. “I thought they were very beautiful,” Muñoz said.

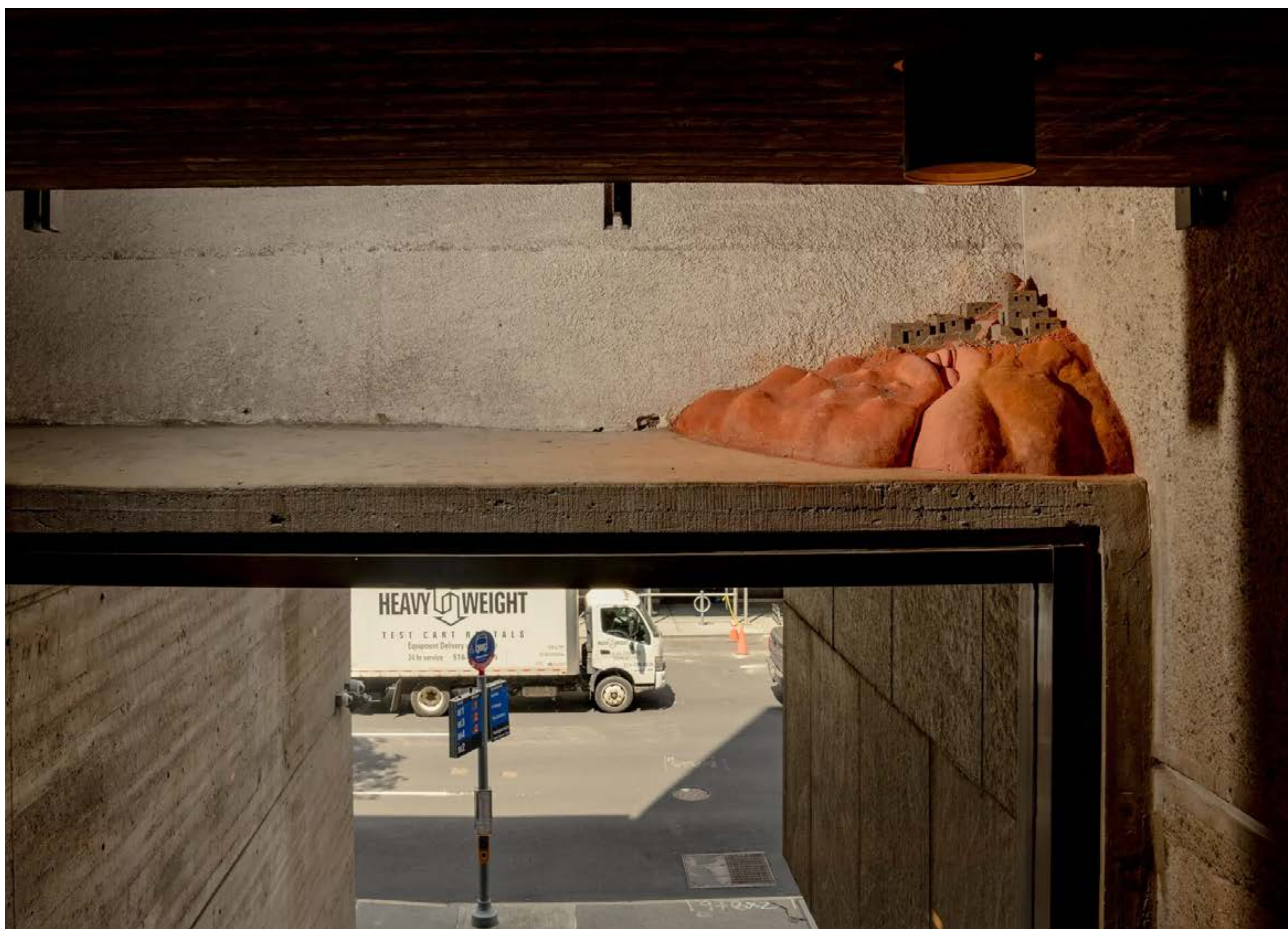
Eventually they assembled the glass eyes in their studio with silicone and bark, went into the field and experimented with putting them into trees on their property. Martin said he restricted himself to using natural cavities.

“Smaller holes that woodpeckers make or the circular hollows left from fallen branches suggest the ocular cavity. And seemed to need only a little help to become an eye,” he said.

In other words, no trees on their property or in the Instituto courtyard were harmed in the making of the pair's artwork.

10. 940 and 945 Madison Avenue, between 74th and 75th Streets

“Dwellings” (1981), Charles Simonds



The Marcel Breuer building on Madison Avenue, temporary home of the Frick Madison, houses one part of Charles Simonds’s sculpture “Dwellings.” The other two parts are on the second-floor windowsill and the roof of the Apple store building across the street. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

With its ocher color and rustic surfaces, “Dwellings” resembles a toy-size Southwestern Pueblo. The 1981 work by the sculptor and artist Charles Simonds was commissioned by the Whitney Museum for its home at the Breuer building as part of a series begun in 1970 where an imaginary civilization of unseen “Little People” migrates through the streets of cities throughout the world.

“Charles Simonds originally was making these little clay villages, and it looked often like abandoned villages or some kind of archaeological sites,” said Adam D. Weinberg, the director of the Whitney Museum (through Oct. 31, when he will be succeeded by Scott Rothkopf). “They were miniature, often in the cracks of walls and on sidewalks, and they were done totally surreptitiously, and sometimes would be up for a very short period of time and then disappear.”

Years ago, when a friend told me about the enigmatic piece at the Whitney, I felt I had been entrusted with a version of a Masonic handshake. As I recall, the piece was unlit and unlabeled, tucked into the stairwell between the museum’s first and second floors, an impish gesture on some curator’s part, I figured. What I didn’t know until recently is that the location, now lit and labeled, was the artist’s strategic choice that allows museum visitors to view the entire piece: Look past the work, through the plate glass window right below, and across Madison Avenue, and you’ll see two more artifacts of Simonds’s mysterious society — one on the windowsill of what is now an Apple store and another on top of the chimney on the roof of the same building.

“You get a sense of migration, that sense that these are maybe different little villages that are in communication with each other,” Weinberg said. “And it’s a way of connecting what’s inside the museum with what’s outside. It’s saying that art doesn’t end at the walls of the museum but goes out into the world.”

The “Dwellings” at 940 Madison Avenue have survived several changes in occupancy. The “Dwelling” at the Breuer building, 945 Madison Avenue, remained through the residence of the Met Breuer to its current tenant, the Frick. In the fall of 2025, Sotheby’s is slated to move into the Breuer building. But the auction house said in a statement that the stairwell home of Simonds’s unseen denizens will not disappear.

If you’d like to discover a less observed “dwelling of little people,” visit the Museum of Art and Design. Nestled in a corner of the lobby but visible from the street at the corner of the building at Columbus Circle is a discreet Simonds installation M.A.D. commissioned in 2011.

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