

ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

*The New York Times,
Let There Be Light, and Art, in the Moynihan Train Hall*

December 2020

Let There Be Light, and Art, in the Moynihan Train Hall

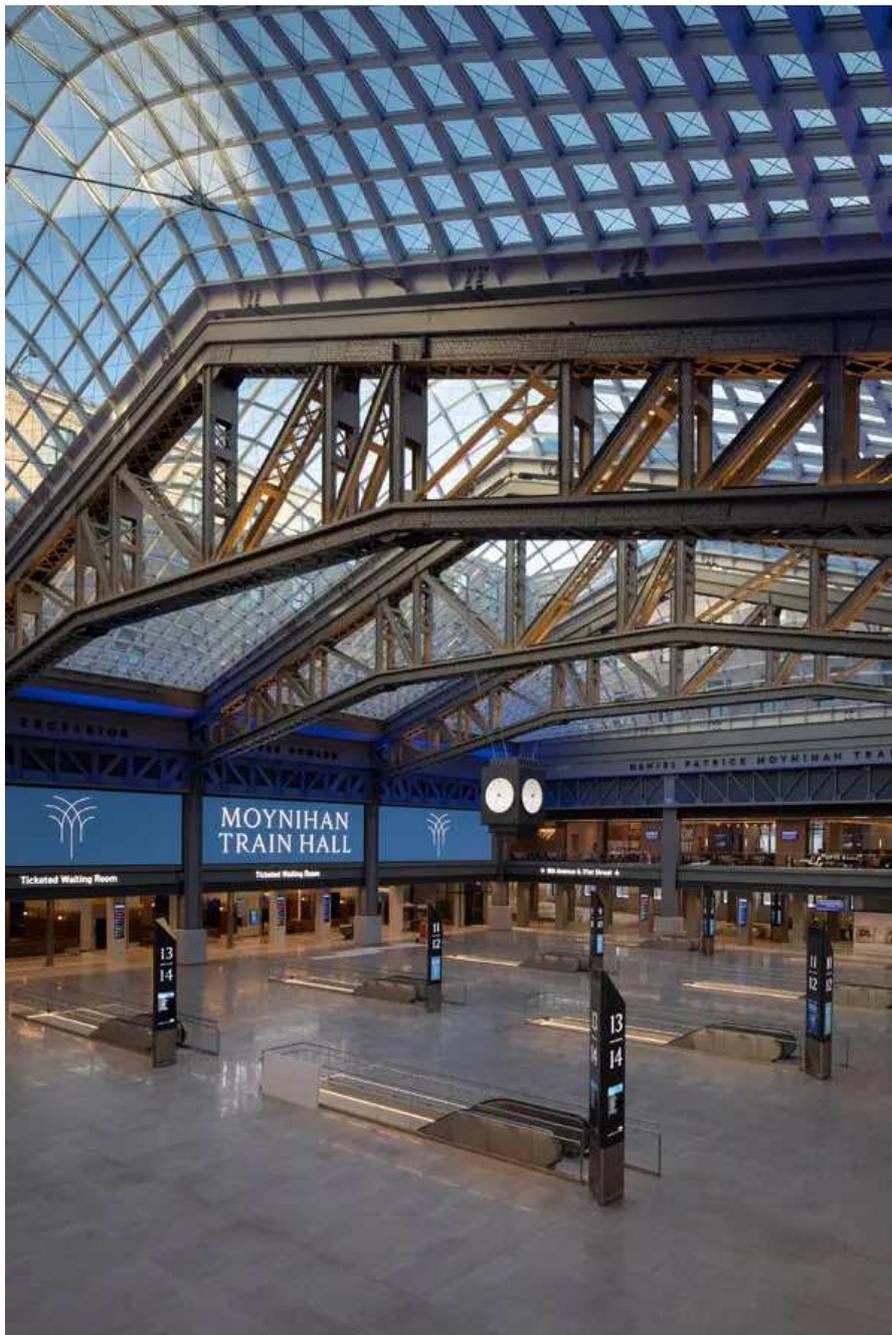
Eyes up: “The Hive,” an art installation by Elmgreen & Dragset, inside the 31st Street entry to the Moynihan Train Hall, is composed of 100 upside-down futuristic buildings hanging like stalactites.



Sunlight is not typically associated with the dingy basement vibe that envelops commuters passing through Penn Station.

But natural light spills across the new Moynihan Train Hall through its massive, 92-foot-high skylight ceiling and illuminates another surprise: permanent installations by some of the most celebrated artists in the world.

Kehinde Wiley, Stan Douglas and the artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset have major pieces prominently displayed in the new \$1.6 billion train hall set to open Friday, offering an expansion of Penn Station's concourse space and serving customers of Amtrak and Long Island Rail Road. The hall, designed by the architecture firm SOM, also connects to subway lines, although they are some distance away.



The 255,000-square-foot Moynihan Train Hall, with an acre of glass across the main hall skylights, was designed by SOM. Escalators seem to disappear into the floor. Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times



The clock is nearly 12 feet tall and more than 6 feet wide. It was designed by Peter Pennoyer Architects. Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

The 255,000-square-foot train hall is inside the James A. Farley postal building, the grandiose Beaux-Arts structure designed by McKim Mead & White in 1912, two years after the original Pennsylvania Station. (New Yorkers may know the Farley Building from rushing up its giant staircase to file income taxes before midnight in mid-April.)

The new hall is named for Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, who first introduced plans for a renovation in the early 1990s, but they were mired in delays for years. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, the driving force behind the project, in 2016 announced a public-private partnership for developing the hall, including Empire State Development, Vornado Realty Trust, Related Companies, Skanska and others.



Kehinde Wiley's backlit, hand-painted, stained-glass triptych called "Go" depicts sneaker-clad break dancers who appear to float across a blue sky. The woman's pointing finger nods to the Sistine Chapel's "Creation of Adam." Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

The Moynihan Train Hall serves as a redemption of sorts for the doomed Penn Station, demolished in 1963 in an act deemed so heinous for the city's historical buildings it is said to have kicked off the nascent national preservation movement.

The new hall fails to solve many of New York's myriad transportation problems — congestion on the tracks, the need for a new tunnel under the Hudson River, the blight of the existing Penn Station, to name a few. But officials say it's a necessary step to complete other transit projects, add more train capacity and to alleviate crowding at Penn Station.

The train hall opens at a time when citizens are being asked to refrain from nonessential travel to limit the spread of the coronavirus, and at a moment when commuter train traffic is extremely low.

But the governor has pointed to the achievement of delivering a major infrastructure project on time despite a pandemic, as well as one that would transcend the Covid-19 era. Mr. Cuomo called the new hall “deeply hopeful.”



The interior of the old Pennsylvania Station, completed in 1910 by McKim, Mead & White. The destruction of that station in 1963 helped jumpstart the national preservation movement. Credit...Getty Images

“It speaks to the brighter days ahead when we will be able to congregate, to pass one another and to share the same space free of fear,” Mr. Cuomo said. “It promises renewal and rebirth of civic life in New York, and points to the opportunity ahead.”

The completion of the project — a station meant to welcome commuters and the rest of the world to New York — serves as a bright spot at the close of a dark year for New York City where deaths from a global pandemic soared in spring and are on the uptick again,

and scores of beloved restaurants and shops have shuttered as the virus pummeled the local economy.



Mr. Wiley pays homage to the metalwork of the James Farley Post Office in the moldings and panels of his stained-glass fresco, seen from the entrance at 33rd Street. Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

On a recent tour of the train hall, masked workers were putting the finishing touches on blue curved benches in a walnut seating alcove in the ticketed waiting area. The hall's radiant flooring feels warm to the touch, and, for now at least, is sparkling clean. Majestic trusses and vaulted skylights nod to the elegant trceries in Penn Station's original concourse. The hall offers free Wi-Fi and a lounge for nursing mothers. A 12-foot-tall clock with a typeface designed for road and railroad signage serves as a reminder of the clock in the demolished Penn Station. Intended as a meeting point, it hangs 25 feet above the floor.

The T List: A weekly roundup of what the editors of T Magazine are noticing and coveting right now.

Construction on the new hall began in 2017 with painstaking restoration of the landmark building's 200,000-square-foot stone facade, its 700 windows, copper roof, steel trusses and terra-cotta cornices. Some of the 120,000 square feet of shopping, dining and retail space won't be ready right away. The train hall won't take up all the space in the building; the post office will still operate. Facebook is moving in as the main commercial tenant.

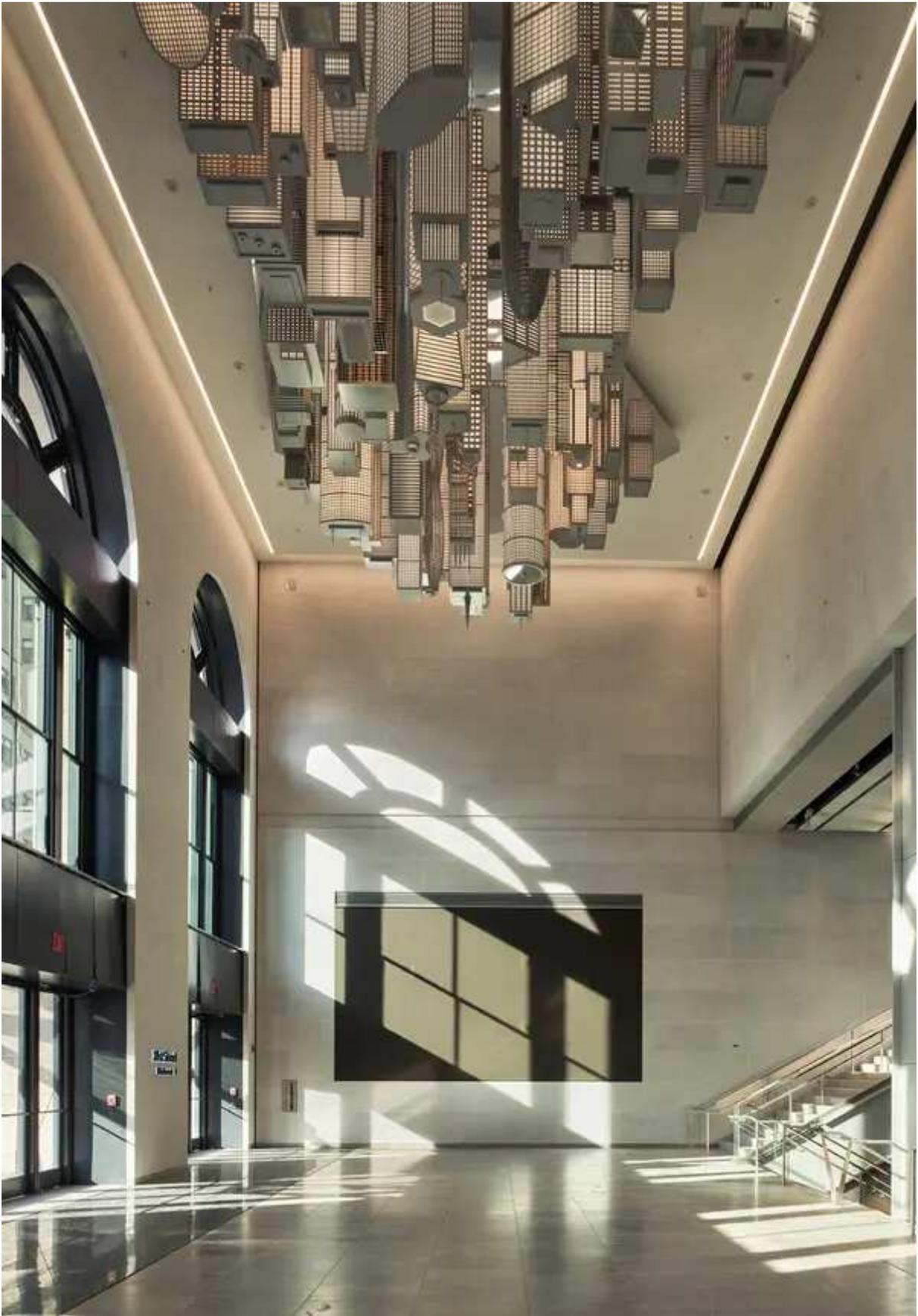


The inviting waiting area for ticketed passengers, designed by the Rockwell Group, was inspired by the wooden seating and globe fixtures in the old Penn Station. A photographic panel staged by the artist Stan Douglas nods to the station's history, when throngs of sympathizers greeted Angelo Herndon, a persecuted labor organizer and champion of racial justice in 1934. Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

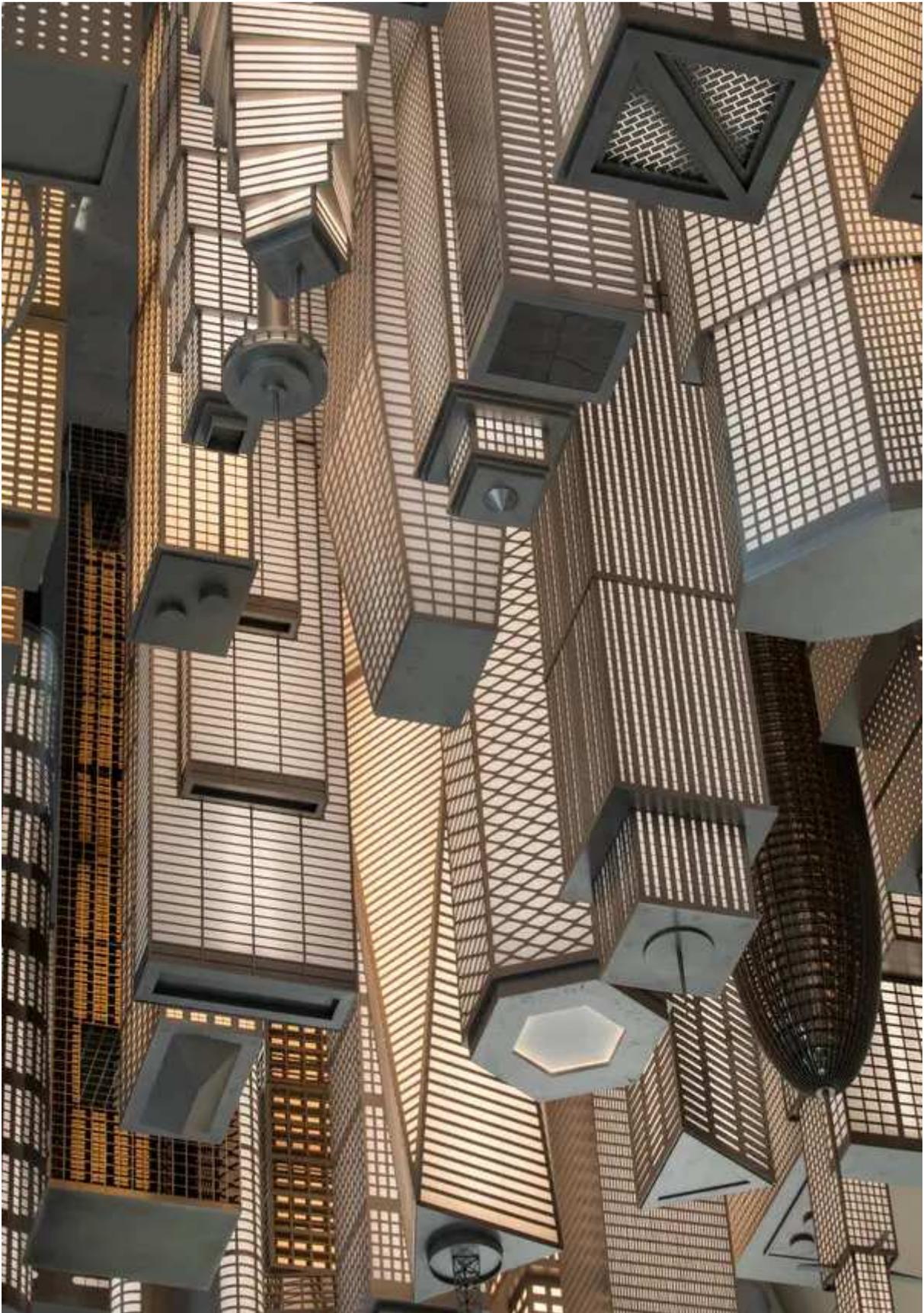
While the new hall pales in comparison to the majesty of the starry-ceilinged main hall of Grand Central Terminal, it will serve as a far more pleasant welcome to commuters than Penn Station, which has been derided as “the La Guardia of train stations.”

The addition of work by well-known artists adds a celebratory vibe, a sense of pride in the public sphere and a method Mr. Cuomo has prioritized at similar transit points in four stations along the Second Avenue subway line (with pieces by Chuck Close, Jean Shin, Vik Muniz and Sarah Sze) and a new Terminal B at La Guardia Airport with installations from Ms. Sze, Laura Owens, Sabine Hornig and Jeppe Hein.

“There’s something to be said about a society gathering around an artist, around his or her vision, to say this is something we believe in collectively,” said Mr. Wiley, best known for his portrait of former President Barack Obama, which hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. “New York needs this right now.”



“The Hive,” one of three permanent art installations, is inside the entry on West 31st Street. Credit... Andrew Moore for The New York Times



“It’s an opportunity for artists to stretch themselves and do something new and different,” said Nicholas Baume, director and chief curator of the Public Art Fund, which oversaw the projects. Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

The space seems intended to always keep commuters looking up, from its sprawling glass skylight to two major ceiling installations at each entry way — Mr. Wiley’s stained-glass paintings of break dancers at 33rd Street and Elmgreen & Dragset’s “The Hive,” a cluster of upside-down models of futuristic skyscrapers, at 31st Street.

“It’s an opportunity for artists to stretch themselves and do something new and different,” said Nicholas Baume, director and chief curator of the [Public Art Fund](#), which oversaw the art project.

The artists submitted their proposals in 2019, before any of them envisioned Covid-19 spreading across the world, and then executed their pieces from afar. The installations cost \$6.7 million.

Here’s a first look at the artists and their projects.

Kehinde Wiley

Mr. Wiley’s backlit, hand-painted, stained-glass triptych called “Go,” across the ceiling of the 33rd Street entrance, depicts sneaker-clad break dancers who appear to float across a blue sky.

The artist, whose paintings often reimagine well-known works with Black subjects, said he wanted to embrace the rarity of contemporary art on stained glass as well as “play with the language of ceiling frescoes” by using his installation to celebrate Black culture.

“So much of what goes on in ceiling frescoes are people expressing a type of levity and religious devotion and ascendancy,” said Mr. Wiley, who has a studio in New York but spent much of the year [in his studio in Dakar, Senegal](#). “For me the movement and space made so much more sense thinking about ways bodies twirl in break dancing.”



Mr. Wiley hand-painted Czech glass with joyful scenes. “The aesthetic of Black culture is the aesthetic of survival, of buoyancy and saliency and the ability to float in the midst of so much,” the artist said. Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times



Mr. Wiley was inspired by the space near the 33rd Street entry to create his ceiling fresco and to “think about ways bodies twirl in break dancing.” Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

One woman wears baggy yellow pants and a crop top; another is outfitted in a denim jacket. Instead of angels and gods in classical frescoes, Mr. Wiley offers Nike logos and pigeons in midflight. The outstretched finger of a young woman in camouflage shorts conjures images of “The Creation of Adam” by Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling.

“It’s this idea of expressing absolute joy — break dancing in the sky,” he said, noting that break dancing began in New York City.

Mr. Wiley toured the train hall taking note of decorative flourishes and metal work. The molding around the three panels was designed to coordinate with the metal around windows outside the building.

Mr. Wiley said he deviated from his usual method of “street casting,” or selecting strangers from the street as models, because he was pressed for time in delivering the work, and instead turned to the subjects of prior paintings.

“The aesthetic of Black culture is the aesthetic of survival, of buoyancy and saliency and the ability to float in the midst of so much,” Mr. Wiley said, adding that he hoped the work would make commuters pause and smile.

“And I hope they recognize themselves,” he said. “I wanted to create, at the intersection of trade, commerce and transportation in the capital of the world’s economy, something that sits as a testament to Black possibility.”

Stan Douglas

Giant photographic panels by Mr. Douglas, a Canadian whose work re-enacts historical moments of tension that connect local histories to broader social movements, serve as the backdrop along a more than 80-foot wall of a waiting area for ticketed passengers. The series, “Penn Station’s Half Century,” is a homage to the original Penn Station, with Mr. Douglas drawing on archival research to recreate nine small but noteworthy moments that occurred there.

Mr. Douglas, who is representing Canada in the 2022 Venice Biennale, invited 400 people – 100 each day of shooting – to an empty hockey arena in Vancouver, where they were dressed in period costumes and spaced apart. He stitched together numerous images on digitally recreated interiors of the demolished station based on old floor plans and photos.

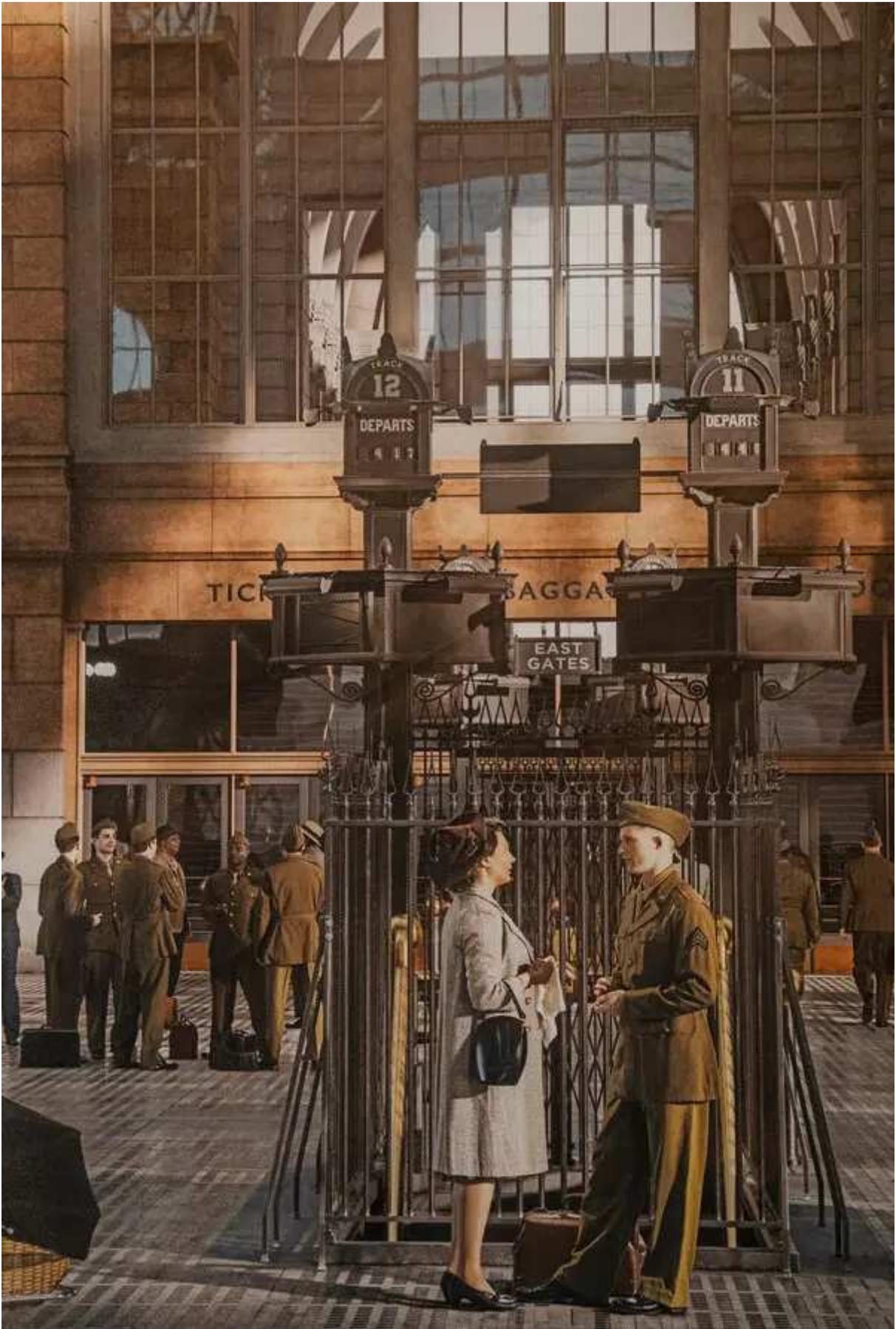
The panels include a depiction of the outlaw and folk hero Celia Cooney, also known as the “Bobbed Hair Bandit,” meeting crowds in 1924 when she was returned to New York to face charges. Mr. Douglas also reimagined Penn Station as the soundstage for the director Vincente Minnelli’s 1945 film “The Clock,” starring Judy Garland.



Stan Douglas's photographic panels along an 80-foot wall re-enact Pennsylvania Station's history and connect it to social reform movements. Here, vaudeville performers trapped during a 1914 snowstorm put on a show, led by Bert Williams, a Black singer. Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times



A wartime goodbye was staged in a hockey arena in Vancouver and stitched with digitally recreated interiors of the demolished station, based on vintage photographs. Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times



An image from Mr. Douglas's photo-panel series, "Penn Station's Half Century." Each person was photographed alone because of Covid-19, and the images layered together later. Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

One joyful image recreates a very New York moment: a spontaneous show put on by vaudeville performers inside the hall after a major snowstorm stranded them and other travelers in 1914. It was led by Bert Williams, a Black singer and comedian who also created pioneering musical theater productions.

Advertisement

Continue reading the main story

“This is complete fantasy — we don’t know what it looked like,” Mr. Douglas said of the scene he created. “We found out who was doing shows on the Eastern Seaboard and incorporated them. We found acrobatic troupes of the era and reference images for costuming and their acts.”

The pandemic threw a curveball to Mr. Douglas.

Each model was masked until the moment before the shutter clicked. And everyone was photographed individually, even for large crowd scenes, then the images layered atop one another.

One person did pass out, Mr. Douglas said, but to everyone’s relief, Covid-19 was not involved. “She was wearing winter clothes inside on a July day,” he said.

Elmgreen & Dragset

Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, Berlin-based artists whose work explores the relationship between art, architecture and design, created “The Hive,” a set of up to nine-foot-tall models of skyscrapers that hang upside down like stalactites from the ceiling at the 31st Street entrance.

The polished, white buildings, some replicas and some purely fictional, look futuristic with their perfect edges and tiny lights. A mirrored base allows commuters to feel projected into the cityscape and creates a sort of mirage of an imaginary city, the artists explained.



The artist duo Elmsgreen & Dragset hoped “The Hive,” with its mirrored base, would offer commuters a new experience each time they entered. Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

“That’s an important aspect of it, that people do see themselves reflected in the base plate,” Mr. Dragset said. “We like that there’s an interaction between the audience and the work itself.”

Advertisement

Continue reading the main story.

Mr. Dragset said the work was named “The Hive” to reflect how cities, with their richness of diversity, function because people accept certain rules for coexisting.

“It’s about a huge collaboration in order to make everyone survive,” he said.

The installation contains nearly 100 buildings, most made of aluminum, that the artists hoped would offer commuters a new experience each time they entered.



For travelers, a new front door to New York: A glimpse of Kehinde Wiley’s ceiling fresco at the entry to the Moynihan Train Station on 33rd Street. Credit... Andrew Moore for The New York Times

“People are often in a rush when they go to the train,” Mr. Elmgreen said. “We thought of making something that you could get the sense of in one viewing, but if you wanted to have a full experience you could stop and look up and discover new aspects of the artwork over and over again.”

The exhibit includes 72,000 LED lights; six buildings can change colors.

Shipping the work to New York from Germany, where it was fabricated, was nerve-racking, the artists said. Together, the buildings weigh more than 30,000 pounds. Mr. Dragset was the only artist among the four who was able to travel to New York to oversee installation this month.