

# The New York Times

*Being Met At the Airport By New Art; Big, Bold Installations For a Rebuilt Kennedy Arrivals Terminal*



Above, Deborah Masters, with consultant Megan Williamson, discusses "New York Streets" during installation.

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MAY 24, 2001

At most international airports, arriving passengers are treated as an afterthought. The departures area gets the attention: the soaring ceilings, the giant mobiles, the grandiose information booths. But freshly landed travelers are left to fend for themselves through endless bland corridors, down pokey escalators and into the maw of passport control.

Using three imposing and intriguing works by New York-area artists, Terminal 4, the \$1.4 billion public-private venture that opens today at Kennedy International Airport, has gone for a more welcoming approach. The new terminal, built by an international consortium, J.F.K. I.A.T., replaces the old International Arrivals Building that is being demolished.

Spread along arrival Concourses A and B, and above the passport inspection booths in the Immigration and Naturalization Service hall, these large, permanent installations give passengers something to think about as they prepare to enter New York, even the United States, for the first time, perhaps to stay for the rest of their lives.

The art reflects what New York has to offer. There is "Travelogues," a witty, technologically innovative, multimedia narrative made of changing images on a row of backlit screens, created by the architectural design team of Diller + Scofidio. There is "Curtain Wall," an abstract work by Harry Roseman, a Vassar College art professor who has used giant curtains made of modified gypsum to play with themes of cloth and clouds, wind and change, homeyness and high drama. And finally, in a 100-yard-long series of panels called "New York Streets," made of brightly painted relief sculptures in the vast immigration hall, there are 28 glimpses of life in New York neighborhoods, from weddings to fish markets, Coney Island beaches to Saks Fifth Avenue, exhilarated basketball players in Greenwich Village to exhausted commuters on the No. 7 subway line in Queens.

"I wanted to get across the idea that New York is lively and energetic but that it is also an extremely fatiguing city," said the work's artist, Deborah Masters, 50. "People exhaust themselves here."

The idea for the terminal's art project was bold from the start: Ms. Masters used the word gutsy. Many airports have scattered art through their terminals, but at Kennedy the notion was to go big, to be noticed.

"We were going for impact," said Wendy Feuer, the art consultant for Terminal 4 who once headed the Arts for Transit program in the New York subway system. "What we wanted, you get by giving fewer artists really big commissions. Fortunately, these artists were up to that, but it took three years of their lives." Forty artists were asked to submit proposals when J.F.K. I.A.T., the private international consortium that owns and operates Terminal 4, first opened its competition for the artwork that altogether cost about \$1 million. The field was narrowed to nine, and then, in 1997, to three.

Some art in the terminal cost nothing. The Alexander Calder mobile "Flight," in the departure area, was inherited from the old arrivals building. For the new arrivals hall, a Japanese company donated a ceramic copy of an Arshile Gorky gouache drawing done in the 1930's as a study for his murals, now destroyed, at the Newark airport.

Mr. Roseman, another veteran of the Arts for Transit program, had done a bronze relief of a landscape at the Wall Street subway station. He recently walked past his newest public work: 30 sculptures that give the appearance of flowing, flapping white material as they stretch down a 600-foot wall along Concourse B.

"I spent months blowing material around," said Mr. Roseman, a photographer whose portraits of the artist Joseph Cornell were recently exhibited at the Menil Collection in Houston.

"Curtain Wall" starts at the top of the concourse's ramp, on a straight wall where the "curtains," seven-feet high at that point, hang with domestic calm and dignity. But as they extend down the incline, the curtains seem to move, billowing sideways and up, swirling until they look more like clouds against the wall's striking blue color, itself part of the installation. "You can't imagine how long it took to get that blue," Mr. Roseman said proudly.

By the bottom of the ramp, the curtains are 14-feet high and their folds flow into the next room, the immigration hall. The sequence is repeated -- more or less -- on Concourse A, which is 40 feet shorter than Concourse B. The concourses end at the immigration hall.

Mr. Roseman and Diller + Scofidio had to duplicate some of their work for the two concourses, known in airport lingo as sterile corridors because they are a no man's land where travelers are on American soil but have not yet entered the United States.

The concept of sterile corridors and their state of suspended identity was part of what attracted Elizabeth Diller, an architecture professor at Princeton University, and her husband and partner, Ricardo Scofidio, who teaches architecture at Cooper Union, to the project.

"We were very enthusiastic about the banality of these very long corridors," Ms. Diller said. "It is a space of limbo, which is very compelling."

Diller + Scofidio have tackled many challenging conceptual projects, including the structure they call the Blur Building, built for Expo '02 in Switzerland in a mist off the banks of Lake Neuchatel. But the airport project allowed them to deal with several of their favorite notions at once.

"It intersected some of the themes that have woven their way through a lot of our work, one of which is contemporary tourism," Ms. Diller said. "This was right up our alley."

One of the conditions set forth by J.F.K. I.A.T. was that the art be low maintenance, which banned interactive installations that can -- and so often do -- break down or go wrong. This led Ms. Diller and Mr.

Scofidio to lenticular technology, which uses ribbed plastic, covered with rows of lenses, to create the illusion of moving images and three dimensions.

"We didn't know much about lenticular, but it was possible with zero maintenance, you could get something that is both sophisticated and very primitive," Ms. Diller said.

A result is something of a cool postmodern cartoon strip strung along a row of screens that project images that look three-dimensional but rather are a sequence of pictures scanned in 30 positions. Altogether there are three stories, or "Travelogues," each told through a collection of vignettes centered on a suitcase. As Ms. Diller puts it, the suitcase is the "highly edited version of one's home or travels."

In one story, "The Collector," there is the intriguing scene at a table set in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, where a man tosses a pair of dice, followed by a scene in which his female companion responds by tossing a glass of red wine at his white shirt. The glass and a souvenir of the tower show up in an X-ray image of a suitcase.

For the traveler, who has first passed "Travelogues" and then "Curtain Wall," the finale is "New York Streets," drawn from scenes captured on the 70 rolls of film that Ms. Masters shot in a two-day tour of the city.

"I wanted the feeling of rushing through, and I wanted things that immigrants would see when they come here," she said.

Narratively and geographically, Ms. Masters's panels are the conclusion of the new terminal's art project. "The panels are about the neighborhoods, the guts of New York," Ms. Feuer said. "You start with Diller + Scofidio, which is about the New York that is slick and cool. Then there is Harry Roseman, abstract but concrete. But when you walk into the immigration hall, you have arrived.'