

Making Artistic Connections at a Subway Station

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Jennifer S. Altman for *The New York Times*

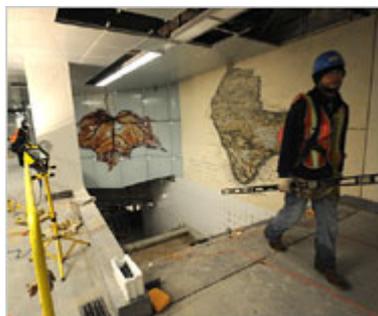
The Starn twins, Doug, left, and Mike, at the new South Ferry station, with their installation "See It Split, See It Change."

In the grays of winter, the last stop on any subway line can have a lonely, ominous feel. But when the new \$530 million South Ferry station, the terminus of the No. 1 train, opens in January, it will have some added luminosity, thanks to a site-specific installation by the artists Doug and Mike Starn. Commissioned by the Arts for Transit program of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the installation, "See It Split, See It Change," includes curved floor-to-ceiling glass walls laced with silhouettes of trees, a marble mosaic of a vintage topographic map of Manhattan, and other imagery drawn from nearby Battery Park.

Although it is the first public artwork by the Starns, 47-year-old identical twins who work in Brooklyn, they view it as integral to a continuing project, "Structure of Thought," rooted in their preoccupation with time and natural bonds. "The tree series goes back about 10 years," Doug Starn said on a tour of the station last week. "It's about — "

"It's about the conveyance of something," Mike Starn said. The brothers finish each other's sentences as a matter of course. "We saw the subway system as a conveyance, where connections are made."

"Tubes and things," his brother added.



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A view of Doug and Mike Starn's installation at South Ferry shows the topographic map and a decomposing leaf.

The work at South Ferry, more than three years in the planning and execution, is among the largest Arts for Transit has ever undertaken. And at more than \$1 million, it is the most

expensive to date, said Sandra Bloodworth, the program's director, who said she hoped it would also be among the most durable.

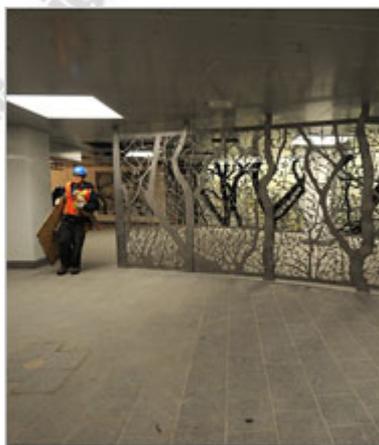
"We believe in building it for it to be there forever, without any intervention by man," Ms. Bloodworth said. The South Ferry terminal, which is entirely new, was built beneath the existing 103-year-old South Ferry station and financed mostly by the federal government as part of a broader effort to rebuild Lower Manhattan after the Sept. 11 attacks. (The opening date has not yet been scheduled.)

When the Starns were first approached by the Arts for Transit program in fall 2004, they were busy with other projects and not particularly interested in participating, Doug said. But the brothers came up with a proposal at the last minute and won the commission the next year. Ms. Bloodworth said the Starns' proposal was chosen on the strength of its imagery, its melding of high technology and organic and urban history, and its sturdy materials.

Despite the high price tag, Doug said, "we lost a lot of money" in terms of the hours and energy spent. His brother added, "It's a labor of love."

The main part of the installation, the curved walls that hug the station, was made using a new and unusual fused-glass technique, like laser printing but with glass powder instead of ink. It gives the panels a layered quality: against a background of cream and celadon— the colors of a winter dawn — the black branches seem to echo one another. For inspiration, the brothers photographed trees in Battery Park; they said they didn't know what kind. "We just go out and shoot good-looking trees," Mike said.

The fused glass was the project's biggest challenge. Even the fabricator, Franz Mayer of Munich, a 160-year-old firm known for its expertise in architectural glass and mosaics, "didn't really know how to work with it," Mike said. "And we didn't know how to work with it. It was trial-and-error, and one year of testing." Still, they did not consider scaling back to a more traditional industrial technique. The tiny bubbles, striations and other imperfections in the finished panels are part of their charm, Doug said. "It feels more alive."



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The curved, floor-to-ceiling glass walls, with their silhouettes of trees, were made using a new fused-glass technique.

The 20-foot-wide topographic map of Manhattan is focused on the island's southern tip — it's like a downtown-to-uptown version of Saul Steinberg's famous New Yorker cartoon — and based on a 1640 map that the twins found. Theirs is overlaid with the contemporary street grid, with the grout making a fitting stand-in for pavement. Placed in the stairwell, it's meant to be the first thing commuters see when they come into the station, invoking the area's history as the first part of the city to be settled. (A portion of an 18th-century seawall uncovered during construction of the station hangs on the wall outside the turnstiles. It is not

part of the Starns' installation.) Near the map is another glass panel with a large image of a decomposing leaf, in oranges and purples.

"We're working with the idea of the splitting and changing" of tree branches and of branches of the subway system, Mike said. "It's something that happens in time as well as space."

The Starns have been navigating these themes since the 1980s, when they became known for exhibiting taped and torn photographs. The scale and the substance of "See It Split, See It Change" have influenced their other projects. "We've always worked in fragile materials before this," Mike said. "It's always about the change it will experience."

Now, in a newly acquired studio in Beacon, N.Y., they are building an "endless tower" sculpture, like a Slinky you can climb in, out of 2,000 bamboo poles. (They have a unified artistic vision, but the Starns don't always get along when they're creating. "When you do something, you argue with yourself," Mike, the more talkative of the two, said. "We do that.")

Although their main studio, in Red Hook, Brooklyn, is visible from outside South Ferry station, neither Starn expects to make much use of the terminal once it opens. They said they thought about other commuters when they conceived the project.

"We did want to make something that could be entertaining day in, day out," Mike said. "It's simple and it's complicated at the same time."

New York Times, New York, 14 dez. 2008, Arts, online. Disponível em <www.nytimes.com>. Acesso em: 18 dez. 2008.

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