

Subway riders are greeted by a blast of Sol LeWitt color

Carol Vogel



Ángel Franco/The New York Times - "Whirls and Twirls (MTA)," one of the last commissions by the artist Sol LeWitt, being installed.

A giant tiled wall of jewel-toned loops and curves — one of the last commissions by the Conceptual artist Sol LeWitt — was unveiled in the 59th Street-Columbus Circle subway station by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority last week. And while its title — “Whirls and Twirls (MTA)” — may sound more like an amusement park ride than an artwork, the eye-popping palette and monumental scale are bolder than most of the art in the subways, a surprising visual jolt for the estimated 69,000 commuters who use the station every day.

On a wall facing a double-wide stairway and landing at 60th Street that leads from the mezzanine to the A, B, C, D and 1 trains, “Whirls and Twirls” is made up of 250 porcelain tiles and covers a space 53 feet wide and 11 feet high.

“It’s one of the largest projects we’ve ever done,” said Sandra Bloodworth, director of Arts for Transit and facilities design for the authority.

It is also one of the most complex. LeWitt, who died two years ago, was known for wall drawings that involved meticulously detailed instructions to his seasoned crew. This project, a permanent installation, was his first in porcelain tile and employs the same color palette — deeply saturated tones of blue, green, yellow, orange, red and purple — that he used in his acrylic wall drawings.

“It’s tough enough to match the colors in acrylics,” said Sofia LeWitt, one of the artist’s two daughters and the overseer of his estate. Since no tile makers in this country were able to replicate the exact shades LeWitt wanted, Ms. LeWitt, members of his studio and transit authority officials sought someone in Europe who could. They finally found artisans in Madrid who could make tiles with just the right color intensity.

The project began five years ago as an integral part of the station’s \$108 million face-lift. When authority officials approached LeWitt, they asked him to choose any site in the station. “He must have picked the wall above the staircase because it is the busiest thoroughfare,” Ms. LeWitt said.

"Whirls and Twirls" relates to LeWitt's wall drawings of the same period with the same title, including one he created for an exhibition on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2005.

Still to come are two circular floor works with compass-rose designs by LeWitt that are scheduled to be installed this fall. One will be at the bottom of the escalator that leads from the Time Warner Center to the turnstile area, and another will be at 58th Street, where a retail arcade is being built. Both will feature contrasting light and dark gray porcelain tiles.

Although he lived in Connecticut, LeWitt was no stranger to New York City's transit system. He did not have a driver's license, and in the city he always took the subway. "He wasn't the car-and-driver type," Ms. LeWitt recalled.

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