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N.Y. artist brings transformative art to Times Square

Toby Buonagurio brings tokens of joy to subway riders all day, every day

If you spend much time in New York, eventually you'll find yourself among the 600,000 or so people who daily pass through the Times Square subway station. And if so, make it a point to stroll past a 600-foot span of glass-block wall in which are embedded 35 pieces of extraordinary sculpture, courtesy of the MTA Arts for Transit program. You'll find it in the Seventh Avenue passage, the 41st Street corridor and along Broadway in the Times Square/42nd Street station.

The exhibition is called "Times Square Times: 35 Times." It is a permanent installation, commissioned in 1997 from internationally renowned ceramicist Toby Buonagurio, who is a senior professor of art and studio program director at Stony Brook University of the State University of New York, where she has taught and been a member of the United University Professions/AFT for 30 years.

Buonagurio was chosen through a juried process that landed her in the company of the late Roy Lichtenstein, the late Jacob Lawrence and Jack Beal. Next she immersed herself in the world of Times Square, an area she had traversed her en-



At right, Toby Buonagurio ushers a visiting school group through an installation of 35 ceramic sculptures in the Times Square/42nd Street subway stop. Above, a close-up of a subway scene sculpture.

tire life, having grown up in the Bronx—where she still resides with her husband, abstract painter Edgar Buonagurio. Despite that familiarity, she spent two years scouting the area, from 41st Street to 48th, from Sixth to Eighth Avenues, during the day and the night, shooting photos and "taking in the parade of life," she says. Her intent, she explains, is to transform the familiar into the spectacular through the medium of her ceramic art.

From her study, three themes emerged—street life, performing arts



and fashion. Then she began sketching the panoramas and shaping the stories within stories that she would form into 35 ceramic relief sculptures. She colored, fired and glazed the sculptures one part at a time until they were perfect.

Each is approximately 13 inches by 13 inches by 3 inches deep, "a cross between a Tiffany's window and an old-fashioned Times Square peep show," she says. "I believe in making the ordinary extraordinary."

It's hard to believe how much she packs into each exuberant, flamboyant, colorful work of art. There are the weary subway riders, the mother and her son with his mitt; the traffic cop at an intersection directing an angry driver while a dog scampers across the street; New Year's Eve revelers with party hats and bubbly in hand; a jazz pianist, his fingers dancing across the keys; a boy eating a big fat hot dog with bright yellow mustard trickling down the side. One sculpture depicts a man and woman—it's the artist herself and her husband, artfully placed at the exit to their subway line, leading to the Bronx.

On an artistic level, the bright colors and glazes of the ceramics are irresistible to the eye. "What I hope for," the UUP professor says, "is one person to walk by and for one minute have a smile on their face. As far as I am concerned, this is the best place to have my art installed in the entire U.S.A."

Buonagurio brings her belief in the transformative power of art into the classroom, where teaching, clearly, is another of her passions. "The students at Stony Brook have similar backgrounds to mine," she says. "It is working class. I can relate to it and respect it."

This spring, Buonagurio was one of three faculty at Stony Brook to receive a Research Foundation Research and Scholarship award.

"That's why being at a university is fantastic," she exclaims. Colleagues "not only encourage you in your work, but when you do it, they applaud."