



UUPer Toby Buonagurio of SUNY Stony Brook stands in the Times Square subway station, which is where her ceramic sculptures are on display.

PHOTOS ON THESE TWO PAGES BY EDGAR R. BUONAGURIO JR. AND TOBY BUONAGURIO

underground art

UUP member's work on display in Times Square subway station

Toby Buonagurio thought of the Times Square subway station as the center of the universe during her New York City childhood. It still seems that way to her: a bustling underground self-contained village, filled with light, noise and the life of the city. Only now, it's also a showcase for the masterpiece of her career.

New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority selected Buonagurio in 1998 to create an installation for a massive renovation of the Times Square station. Other artwork has been installed at various locations around the subway as part of the "Arts for Transit" project that aims to retool these vast public places into galleries on the go. Buonagurio, a senior professor of art and a world-renowned ceramic sculptor at SUNY Stony Brook, felt an immediate connection with the project.

A LASTING HONOR IN TIMES SQUARE

It's been two years since her 35 brightly colored, hand-sculpted and painstakingly

detailed scenes of New York City's performing arts, fashion and street life — entitled "Times Square: 35 Times" — were installed in their underground gallery. Although ceramic might seem fragile to the layperson, it's actually very durable a medium, and Buonagurio is happy to report that her subway art has proven more than equal to its rough-and-tumble setting.

"Times Square really has changed," said the effusive Buonagurio, a longtime UUP member whose accent is pure native New Yorker but whose world view is as global as her beloved city. "You can be there any time of the day and night and you hear any language. It's rejuvenating — I love being there."

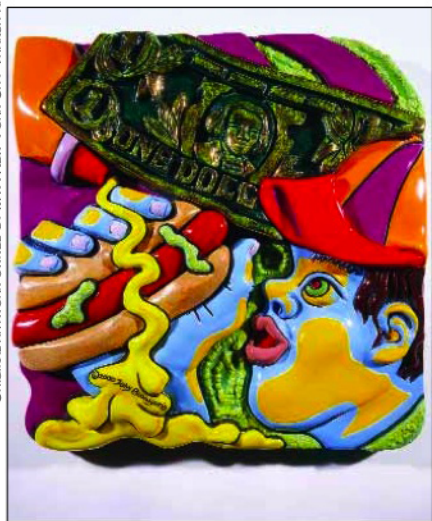
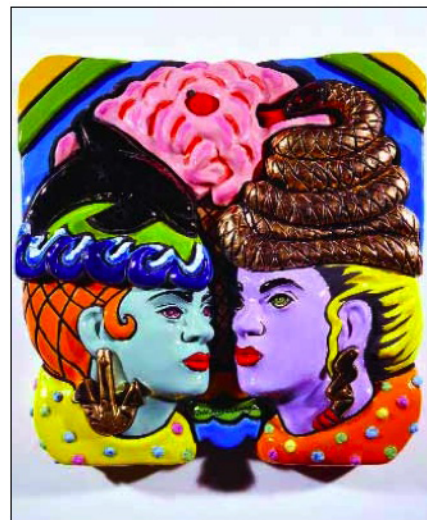
That's a good thing, because Buonagurio spent untold hours scoping out the site and collecting ideas for her designs, and then putting her research into action at the Bronx home and studio she shares with her husband, abstract painter Edgar Buonagurio. For months, she rode the subway and strolled around Times Square at all hours,

sketching, photographing and observing. From the start, her attitude toward the project was, "This is going to be owned by the MTA, but this is going to belong to the people of the city of New York."

The finished project consists of 35 sculpted panels, slightly less than 14 inches square and set into specially lighted booths in a wall of glass block. It's not entirely accidental that viewers might compare them to the intensely lit display windows at Tiffany's jewelry store on Fifth Avenue, or the dioramas of a natural history museum. But the stories told in Buonagurio's panels are contemporary New York City in all its funky, flashy style: A woman dressed for the revelry of Times Square on New Year's Eve; two models sporting high-fashion hats; a hot dog dripping with mustard.

A GIFT OF JOY TO THE CITY

The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks happened halfway through Buonagurio's work on the project. She did not stop; she



did not even slow down. She kept working. And in the end, she also kept to her original design, out of her belief that her subway project without any special tribute to the World Trade Center was its own form of memorial, given the exuberant celebration of city life depicted in her panels.

"The human spirit is about moving forward," Buonagurio said. "In the back of my mind, I probably thought that the city needs all the joy that it can get."

Buonagurio has been a member of the Stony Brook arts faculty for 30 years, a record of service recently honored by her campus administration. She credits SUNY with giving her the best of both worlds: an appreciation for research, be it scientific or artistic, coupled with the opportunity to train future artists.

"I cannot imagine a better pairing of sensibilities; I've grown up there," Buonagurio said. "The best part of being

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**— Toby Buonagurio
SUNY Stony Brook**

at a research university is they want you to do your work, whatever that is. They are excited about the creative process, whatever that process is."

She has always been a pioneer, says her colleague and fellow UUP member Stephen Larese, who is in charge of visual resources at the Stony Brook art department. Her ceramic sculptures have always been popular in Japan, where they evoke historic and contemporary artistic traditions. Ceramic medallions and instal-

lations were seen in the European Renaissance architectural style. But now Buonagurio's stylized, whimsical designs are more popular than ever in the contemporary art world, Larese said.

"The tradition goes way back, but it's updated by her style," Larese said.

A half-million people hustle by "Times Square: 35 Times" on their way through the station every day, and sometimes Buonagurio is part of that crowd. But the thrill of seeing her art in such a prominent venue is still vivid for her, no matter how many times she catches a glimpse of it in transit, just like her fellow travelers.

"What I'm hoping is that for that moment in time, when someone walks by, they have this positive, uplifting experience," Buonagurio said. "If I've accomplished that, I'm happy."

— Darryl McGrath