



Trained eye

Renegade artist Ellen Harvey hooks up with the Man for her latest project

By **Alia Akkam**

Rushing to and from the trains at the bustling Queens Plaza subway station doesn't usually allow for moments of contemplation. But artist Ellen Harvey is encouraging passengers to find a little tranquility in the station's recently unveiled *Look Up, Not Down*, a 2,000-square-foot mosaic she designed after winning the MTA's Arts for Transit competition in 2001. Forcing people to stop and ponder is nothing new for the Williamsburg-based artist, though. Harvey made waves from the summer of 1999 to the spring of 2001 with her "New York Beautification Project," in which she scoured the city for graffiti sites amid Mayor Rudy Giuliani's aggressive clean-up campaign, and illegally covered 40 spots with small, oval landscape paintings in oil. The Queens Plaza mosaic marks her foray into the legitimate sphere of public art—with the government's money, to boot.

The permanent glass mosaic offers an essentially true-to-life 360-degree view of the entire city that one would be able to see from an imaginary building located directly above the subway. According to the artist—who has also shown work at the Whitney and currently has an installation on view at Philadelphia's Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine

Arts—it allows commuters to "feel like giants floating above the city" as they walk through the station.

Look Up, Not Down isn't just a pretty diversion. It helps strap-hangers with that perpetual subway dilemma: which exit to use when leaving an unfamiliar station. The mosaic—which sprawls over six walls—orients passengers with what's above. As Harvey explained, she wants people to walk by and feel reassured that even though they're underground, they

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know where they are. The images are meticulously detailed, and are based on photos Harvey took of each building. Amid a soaring sky of soothing, blue mosaic tiles are familiar landmarks: The Citicorp Center mingles with unnamed warehouses on one side, lower Manhattan sits on a different wall and the Triborough Bridge is on yet another.

But the landscape has already started to change since the project

was conceived. Because Harvey won the competition soon after September 11, it was hard not to be influenced by that pivotal moment in the city's history. She opted to remain faithful to that period throughout the mosaic. American flags once waving from buildings with pride—long since taken down—were kept in. The spot where the World Trade Center once stood is subtly marked by an image of the sun. "New York has a short memory. This is what this memory looks like," Harvey says. "Mosaics last quite a long time. By the time I'm in my nineties, I can come back and say, 'Wow, this is what [the city] looked like.'"

The permanent nature of the work is in stark contrast to what was previously Harvey's best-known public work, the "New York Beautification Project." She plowed ahead with the NYBP without getting permission from the city, building owners or the original graffiti artists whose work she was painting over. (Her one rule was to stop painting if anyone objected.) And while NYBP was documented in a book from Gregory R. Miller & Co., the majority of those works have now been covered up. A glimpse of her art still remains on a wall on East Tremont Avenue in the South Bronx and on a pillar on Palmetto Street in Ridgewood—at least when she recently checked.

Sandra Bloodworth, executive director of Arts for Transit at the MTA, is thrilled about the Queens Plaza mosaic—especially its user-friendly aspect. "It grounds you and orients you to where you are. It might be subtle, but when people go through there, they will come to understand over time that it tells them what's above," she says. But how does she feel about nurturing Harvey's creativity with MTA dollars after that series of not-so-legit paintings? While Bloodworth is, naturally, opposed to defacing public property, she does admit that, if anything, Harvey's beautiful artwork "showed how unbeautiful graffiti is, in a way."

Ultimately, Harvey doesn't see any conflict of ideology between her renegade past and her current collaboration with the MTA. As she says, "the motivation behind both is very similar. I like making things for people." ■