

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Forbes

With New Art In A New Train Hall, Penn Station Sets Out To Transport People Emotionally

Jonathan Keats

25 January 2021



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When a blizzard shut down New York rail service in the winter of 1914, vaudeville performers stranded in Pennsylvania Station didn't miss a beat. Led by the impresario Bert Williams, the singers and dancers and acrobats staged two days of impromptu performance, taking the magisterial marble stairway as their stage. According to historical accounts, the public was transfixed. For a variety show, it would have been tough to match the variety of a cast and audience spontaneously selected by the unforeseen closure of a Manhattan transportation hub.

The moment was nearly forgotten by the time McKim, Mead & White's Beaux Arts masterpiece was demolished to break ground for Madison Square Garden in 1963, and nobody remained to recall it when the Canadian artist Stan Douglas decided to recreate it for the new Moynihan Train Hall last year. Working from archives, Douglas reconstructed the scene using a combination of live actors and computer generated imagery. His two glass panels depicting the vaudeville extravaganza are amongst the artworks that transformed the recent opening of Moynihan into a cultural event.



Image: Moynihan Train Hall. Photo by Spencer Platt/Getty Images

The new hall has been talked about for a long time, and has undergone many redesigns since the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan first proposed that the old James A. Farley Postal Building be converted into a train depot in the 1990s. The underlying idea, which has always remained essentially the same, was that the universally-despised and perpetually-overcrowded station beneath Madison Square Garden could be partly redeemed by diverting some rail traffic to McKim, Mead & White's underused postal facility across the street, repurposing tracks laid to deliver mail when the Farley Building was erected in 1912.

The decision to include contemporary art in the train hall was hardly avant-garde. In New York alone, the Public Art Fund has overseen commissions for numerous subway stations, and art is built into the transportation infrastructure of most other cities.

And the work that the Public Art Fund selected is hardly edgy. The most compelling piece is a stained-glass triptych by the American artist Kehinde Wiley that adapts the visual language of Renaissance religious frescos to depict break dancers on the street. The spectacle of Wiley's artwork is matched by the conceptual impact of decorating a secular temple to a city on-the-go with a transcendent urban activity.

Wiley's motivation is telling. "I wanted to create, at the intersection of trade, commerce and transportation in the capital of the world's economy, something that sits as a testament to Black possibility," he told the New York Times in a recent interview. Even more than the captive audience caught by a 1914 blizzard, the constant movement of heavy foot traffic gives Wiley the chance to inspire an audience of the utmost diversity.

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Image: "Go", by Kehinde Wiley. Photo by Spencer Platt/Getty Images

The ceiling of Moynihan Train Hall is also the site of a large three-dimensional cityscape by the Scandinavian artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset. Their sculpture is certainly the most vivid of the three commissioned artworks, an all-too-typical example of public art that is innocuously whimsical.

Douglas's work, too, exemplifies the tendency of public arts organizations to play it safe. Recreating minor scenes from Penn Station's storied past – in addition to the impromptu vaudeville act, he has depicted the arrival of the "Bobbed Hair Bandit" Celia Cooney in 1924 and the filming of *The Clock* by Vincent Minnelli two decades later – he has successfully packaged nostalgia for mass-consumption in a space that evokes a time when civic architecture was a luxury bestowed upon the public. For all their artistic accomplishment, Douglas's mesmerizing scenes lack historical sophistication. They bring enjoyment without enrichment.

Nevertheless, the recollection of Bert Williams and his spontaneous vaudeville spectacle is a reminder that talent can be meritorious in its own right. There is social value in most any instance of shared awe, which can come from performance or art or architecture, and can lead to a sense of cohesion and civility – particularly important in a time of isolation and polarization. Like the original Penn Station, Moynihan Train Hall is a transportation hub designed to transport people in every sense of the word, well times to meet circumstances that McKim, Mead and White could never have envisioned.