

Go to the New La Guardia for the Art

The airport's \$22 million face-lift breaks away from corporate schlock.

By Max Pearl

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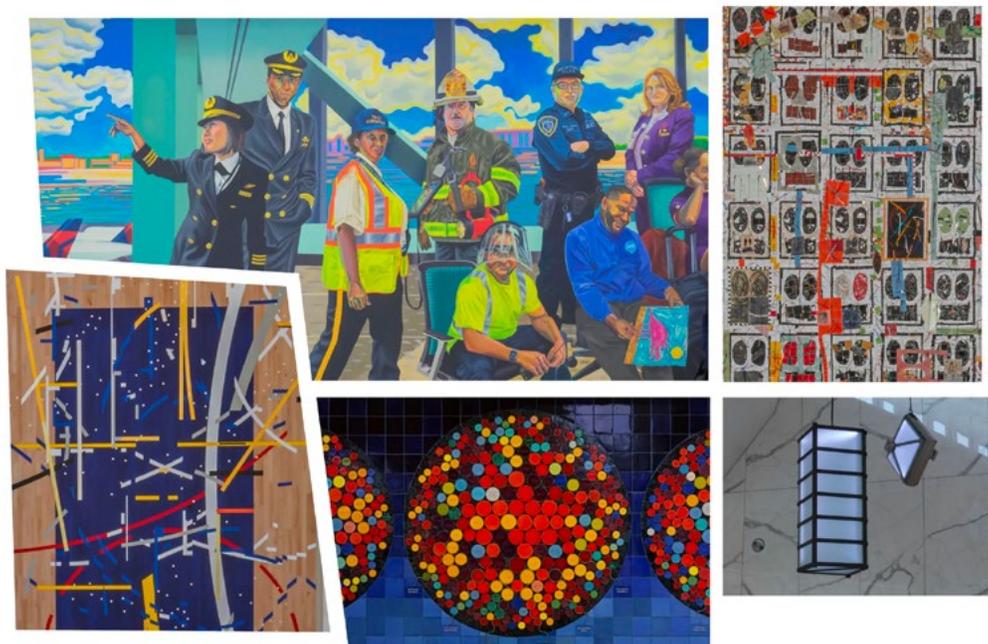


Photo: Vu Tran

Until last year, traveling through La Guardia Airport was a deeply undignified experience. The baggage areas suffered from low ceilings and creepy fluorescent lighting; the floors and surfaces were built from cheap industrial materials that recalled midtown cubicles; the cramped footprint and poor crowd control made you feel like a turkey marching to slaughter. Now, when you get out of the taxi and roll your luggage into Terminal B's gloriously lit, high-ceilinged baggage area, your vision is flooded by artist Laura Owens's 500-foot mosaic wall, I 🍕 NY, a periwinkle sky dotted with cumulus clouds and pixelated emoji images of New York icons: a pizza slice, the Cyclone, the sign from the Stonewall Inn. It's one of the many large-scale artworks commissioned for LGA's two new terminals as part of its public art program, which is overseen by curators from the the Public Art Fund in Terminal B and the Queens Museum in Terminal C. Boasting a budget of over \$22 million dedicated to art alone, the LGA renovation is one phase in a larger \$30 billion revamp of New York's three commercial airports, projected to finish in 2030.

Most airports don't have anyone with an M.F.A. consulting on their art installations. This is perhaps why so many might recall the art in airports, if they can recall it all, as bland corporate décor or

maddeningly literal, like the giant flamingo in the Tampa airport or the monumental blues guitars in Austin. There are a few exceptions, like Chicago's O'Hare airport, home to Michael Hayden's iconic neon installation, which turns a claustrophobic walkway into a giant kaleidoscope, and SFO, which has 34 employees to oversee its museum-quality collection. But mostly, we use "airport art" as a pejorative. The other city airport offers a perfect example: the New York-themed "Selfie Station" that JFK revealed last year in Terminal 4, a booth that invited visitors to take selfies with shopping carts full of "Thank You" grocery bags as if lugging around suburban-style carts were a quintessentially New York activity. The architects of LGA's new public art program mostly sidestepped the twin traps of blandness and kitsch, demonstrating a seriousness that reflects the importance of art (and artists) to the city's identity. But also, from the passenger's perspective, it feels like somebody up there actually cares.

The art starts immediately as you walk from the parking garage into Terminal B's pre-security atrium. On the way in, you move through a lofty corridor where sunlight illuminates Sabine Hornig's translucent window installation, *La Guardia Vistas*. Photos of unmistakable New York buildings — the green-glass façade of the U.N. Headquarters, the red-and-white smokestacks of the Con Ed plant in Astoria — are collaged into one tightly packed skyline and tinted in stained-glass hues to create a cathedral-like ambience. In the baggage area, Laura Owens's mosaic wall has a mood-boosting effect: Its pastel colors make the room feel animated, and its use of folksy mosaic tiles creates an air of whimsy that's unusual for an airport. (I saw two children playing tag underneath a tile rendering of a halal food cart, which matched the vibe.) The centerpiece of the atrium is a monumental sculpture by artist Sarah Sze, who's known for architectural assemblages made of countless tiny parts. This commission is among her most technical: a radiant sphere of metal rods that floats in a cutout between the arrivals and departures floors. The contrast between its complex schematics and its buoyancy (enhanced by hundreds of photos of the sun that form its inner lining) evokes the wonder one might feel watching a 450-ton 747 lift into the air like a paper lantern.

But once you get past security, typical airport schlock starts to interrupt the air of refinement. When I ask my friends for their thoughts on the art in Terminal B, the first thing they usually mention is the ridiculous fountain in the food court that spits water in the shape of various New York icons in sync with a pop cover of Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York." Granted, the people eating and milling about in the food court seemed quite captivated by it (it certainly evoked more of a response than the Sarah Sze sculpture), but it felt more like a Midwest megamall attraction than a New York City landmark. Meanwhile, on the wall next to Mariam Ghani's rainbow-hued ceramic mural in the baggage-claim area, *The Worlds We Speak*, there's a cheesy photo panorama of Manhattan with a big "I  New York" logo that interrupts passengers' brief but welcome respite from the otherwise constant marketing.

Terminal C next door has fewer quirks, but it's also clearly built for a more moneyed clientele. Owned and operated exclusively by Delta, it boasts the largest and most luxurious Delta Sky Club ever built, a 38,000-square-foot lounge with an outdoor terrace under construction. And if Terminal B's art program consists of family-friendly artworks with immediate appeal, the Queens Museum curators who oversaw Terminal C took risks on a headier selection. Entering the terminal from the departure area, the first thing you see is Rashid Johnson's 45-foot-tall mosaic, *The Travelers' Broken Crowd*, one of two large-scale works adorning the marble walls on either end of the magnificent pre-security atrium. Visible from all three floors of the gate area thanks to generous sight lines, it consists of rows of tiny abstract faces crafted from a riotous array of materials: jagged ceramic shards, chunks of charred wood, wax and soap wedges, even oyster shells and mirrors smashed into spiderwebs. The mosaic captures the dynamism and vitality of a thronging New York avenue, but, with sharp edges that add an anxious undertone, it avoids looking like a Disneyfied view of city life.

Bookending the other end of the atrium is a monumental wall installation by Bronx native Ronny Quevedo called *Pacha Cosmopolitanism Overtime*. Not quite a painting and not quite a sculpture, it's a 45-foot-tall panel made from materials typically used in basketball courts: tan wooden planks and curving play lines in bold primary colors. It's situated on a wall next to an escalator, and as you ascend or descend, the play of natural light across the latticework of intersecting lines creates a welcome feel of unencumbered flow. Quevedo, who grew up watching soccer games here in Queens with his dad, an ex-professional player from Ecuador, was inspired by the indoor courts where the city's Latin communities meet for weekend matches. He knows that most people will think of basketball when they see it, but for him it refers to a very specific local phenomenon that constitutes a huge part of New York City's DNA, even if many New Yorkers don't know it. "These games are where I got to meet people from so many other diasporas: Colombians, Guatemalans, Venezuelans, Brazilians, Argentinians," he says. "It made me understand that my upbringing was similar to others', and that soccer is this unifying force."



Photo: Vu Tran; Ronny Quevedo's *Pacha Cosmopolitanism Overtime*.

In Terminal C, it's the specificity of the pieces that rises to the challenge of a public space like La Guardia. Both Johnson and Quevedo evoke, for instance, the social fabric of nearby immigrant neighborhoods like Jackson Heights, where you can pass Tibetan, Nepalese, Colombian, and Ecuadorian blocks in a 15-minute walk. But the artists achieve this through a subtle balance of abstraction, material references, and a bit of backstory, gesturing at the finer points of their lived experience rather than hammering us over the head with "we are the world" platitudes.

The revived public art program is, in some ways, a return to La Guardia's roots as a flagship airport in the New Deal era's Federal Art Project. It reminds me, in its ambition, of one of the most

spectacular murals of that era, James Brooks's *Flight*, which lives a quiet existence in the rotunda of La Guardia's Marine Air Terminal, its oldest and smallest wing. Then-Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, who militated for the construction of the airport — and famously refused to deplane at Newark because his ticket said New York, not New Jersey — commissioned *Flight* with those federal funds. Rendered in a high modernist style that complements the building's Art Deco idiom, it includes cameos from the ancient Greek mathematician Archytas, said to have designed the first mechanical bird, along with Icarus, da Vinci, and the Wright brothers. Astrological motifs, cosmic abstractions, and portraits of the airport's workers are interspersed among these vignettes. By today's cynical standards, it presents a remarkably utopian vision for better living through technology, with the scale to match.

For passengers who have yet to see *Flight*, there's Aliza Nisenbaum's mural *The Ones Who Make It Run* in the Delta post-security checkpoint area. It also features airline workers — in this case, 16 real-life Delta employees, from taxi dispatchers to firefighters and pilots — arranged against the windows that look out across the Flushing Bay. It is the only commissioned artwork that lives on this side of security (an odd choice, since passengers usually only have time to kill once they're past TSA), and it's displayed a little unceremoniously, so you could be forgiven for hurrying past it. Though it seems at first like a work of social realism, Nisenbaum emphasizes the endearing quirks of her subjects' facial expressions through her use of blue and green highlights, presenting her subjects as individuals, not archetypes. She spent hours with each worker as part of her process, interviewing them about their lives and observing their demeanor, and these details come across in the work. Depending on your personal philosophy, you might feel disconcerted by the Delta logo conspicuously displayed on the bottom left, as if the diversity of its staff were a selling point. But if every corporation and city or state government took public art this seriously, this concession would be a small price to pay.