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Set in Glass, Artist's Ode to Bronx Life is Acclaimed

by Sewell Chan

The Freeman Street subway station, a few blocks south of Crotona Park in the south-central Bronx, could not seem farther from the art gallery precincts of Chelsea, SoHo and Dumbo. So New Yorkers might be surprised to know that a series of colored-glass panels on the elevated subway station has been acclaimed as an exemplary work of public art.

The work, known as "The El," involves six scenes made of thousands of pieces of faceted glass, which are about an inch thick — far thicker than stained glass — and is held together by epoxy, for durability in harsh outdoor environments. The artist, Daniel Hauben, 52, created the work as a commission for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Arts for Transit project, which has placed artworks throughout the nation's busiest transit system.

In June, "The El" was one of 40 works of art selected by Americans for the Arts, a nonprofit organization that promotes arts in the United States, for recognition in its annual Year in Review overview of exemplary contemporary public art installations.

On Wednesday morning, several officials gathered at the station to celebrate the distinction. They included Christopher P. Boylan, deputy executive director for corporate and community affairs at the authority; William Aguado, executive director of the Bronx Council on the Arts; and Earl Brown, deputy borough president in the Bronx.

In a phone interview, Mr. Hauben, who has lived in the Bronx for all but five years of his life, said the recognition was especially sweet because the work is so far from the art world's center of gravity.

"It's not Times Square, it's the Freeman Street station in the Bronx," he said. "Often, when I talk to people about it and show them images, when I tell them where it is, I feel it's not necessarily likely they'll make it to that part of the Bronx, which is not on the beaten path for a lot of people. It was certainly wonderful to get this kind of acknowledgment."

"The El," one of 26 works installed by Arts for Transit in Bronx subway stations since 1993, was commissioned as part of a \$10.4 million rehabilitation of the station, which is served by the Nos. 2 and 5 trains.

Mr. Hauben is primarily known as a painter, and he acknowledged that the process of converting paint into glass was not easy. He collaborated with a fabricator, Larry Gordon. Mr. Hauben explained in a phone interview: "I was directly involved with everything except the actual cutting of the glass. I made the maquettes, the scale drawings that show the pieces. For me, the challenge of course was to take my paintings, which are normally tremendously more detailed, and to reduce them to these flat patterns of solid-colored pieces that still can read as a recognizable scene, with depth and dimensionality. The process unfolded over about a five-year period."

He continued: "At first, being completely new to this material, I was reliant, to a great deal, on the fabricator, Larry Gordon Studios, out in Port Washington. The earlier pieces, unfortunately, I wasn't as happy with. When we put all the pieces together — thousands for each pane — they were laid out flat against a wooden table and you couldn't see the light."

But Mr. Hauben became more confident with the medium of faceted glass, and he now says he is happy with the outcome.



Panels from "The El," a colorful glass artwork by Daniel Hauben at the Freeman Street elevated station on the Nos. 2 and 5 lines.

David Goldman for *The New York Times*



Theodore C. Landsmark, the president of the Boston Architectural College and a juror for the Year in Review, wrote of Mr. Hauben's work: "Growing up a half-century ago on the subways between the Bronx and Harlem gave me an appreciation of how a bit of artistic beauty might give riders and workers opportunities for reflection on where they were, and where they might be going. It is a privilege to recognize the great stained glass work of Daniel Hauben, who realized this dream I'd had of subway beautification as a source of personal contemplation."

Mr. Hauben, who grew up in the northeastern part of the borough and now lives in Kingsbridge, near Riverdale, said of the citation, "It's an acknowledgment and verification of my connection to the community — and a little bit of attention, which every artist hopes for." ■