

Chuck Close: *Subway Figures*



Chuck Close - *Subway Figures*, 2017 (installation view of Lou Reed portrait). Ceramic tile with hand-painted glaze; 9 x 7 ft; photo by Donald Farnsworth.

Magnolia Editions is pleased to announce the studio's involvement in what has been billed as the "largest public art installation in New York history," when *Subway Figures* (2017) by Chuck Close and works by three other artists were permanently installed in New York City's Second Avenue subway expansion, opening January 1st, 2017. Magnolia Editions fabricated ceramic tile portraits of Lou Reed and Philip Glass from Close's *Subway Figures*; over the past eight years, the studio also developed the technique used to fabricate these two portraits.

Installed at the Second Ave-86th Street station, Close's *Subway Figures* comprises a dozen large-scale portraits of contemporary artists Philip Glass, Zhang Huan, Kara Walker, Alex Katz, Cecily Brown, Cindy Sherman, Sienna Shields, Pozsi B. Kolor, and Lou Reed, as well as two self-portraits. With ten of these works slated for fabrication by Mosaika Art & Design using a combination of glass mosaic and ceramic tile techniques, Close requested that Magnolia Editions devise a method to fabricate his nine-foot-tall portraits of Lou Reed and Philip Glass.



Subway Figures, 2017 (installation view of Philip Glass portrait). Ceramic tile with hand-painted glaze; 9 x 7 ft; photo by Donald Farnsworth.



Tallulah Terryll, Heather Peters, and Mikael Kirkman working on Chuck Close's *Subway Figures* at Magnolia Editions. Each value layer is hand painted with underglaze; a layer of acrylic magenta ink is printed to mask the layer; and excess glaze is cleaned by hand before firing in the kiln.

After consulting with local ceramics experts including John Toki, Amy McClure, Ben Belknap and Mikael Kirkman, Magnolia Editions director Donald Farnsworth and master printer Tallulah Terryll devised an innovative technique to realize Close's imagery. While experimenting with a more traditional masking strategy, using a UV-cured acrylic printer to print an acrylic mask on the non-image area and applying glaze to the image area, Farnsworth and Terryll discovered that the opposite operation was also possible. A value could be painted in a general, all-over application of underglaze and then trapped in specific areas using waterproof acrylic, after which glaze from non-image areas could be washed away by hand.

The resulting process, refined over the last eight years, begins by separating each photographic image (or in Philip Glass's case, a photograph of Close's original painting) into individual layers,



each corresponding to one of nineteen values on a spectrum from white to black. Each of these values is then hand painted using underglaze and masked off by a carefully registered application of printed magenta acrylic ink. This procedure is repeated for each of the nineteen values. The tiles are then washed with water, removing unwanted glaze but leaving glaze undisturbed in the image areas where it has been trapped beneath the acrylic layer. Each tile becomes a miniature topographic landscape, with low-lying areas of light values and raised areas of dark values. The tiles are then fired; as the heat of the kiln causes the acrylic mask to burn off, only the underglaze layers remain to cumulatively build up the image from layers of light and



Master printer Tallulah Terryll paints a layer of underglaze on tiles for *Subway Figures* at Magnolia Editions while a large-scale flatbed printer lays down a layer of magenta acrylic ink to serve as a mask.



Donald Farnsworth with Philip Glass and Laurie Anderson in October 2016, showing them the images below of *Subway Figures* being installed; photo by Arlene Kim Suda.

dark values. Finally, a clear glaze is applied and the tiles are subject to one last high-temperature firing. Each tile was formed and fired with the help of Mikael Kirkman. Ceramic sculptor Richard Shaw also made an invaluable contribution to the project by providing soft, well-used brushes from his studio, ensuring that the glaze was laid down in smooth and uniform layers.

The road to installing the nine-by-seven-foot ceramic portraits has been long and arduous. Early tests resulted in painted values that cracked and flaked or turned to bubbling lava, losing details; preliminary firings caused tiles to explode in the kiln. A small-scale ceramic test using Close's iconic *Big Self-Portrait* was rejected by the MTA, apparently because it depicts the artist smoking a cigarette. Throughout the process, Close offered continual support and encouragement. Lou Reed, the iconic subject of one of the portraits, passed away in October of 2013; three years later, Farnsworth was able to share pictures of the ceramic tile portraits in progress to Reed's widow, the artist and composer Laurie Anderson, and to fellow Close subject Philip Glass via his iPhone after a concert by the two musicians in Carmel. Both Glass and Anderson were pleased to see that their friend and partner's image would be immortalized beneath the streets of the city he loved.



Photo: Mike Minna

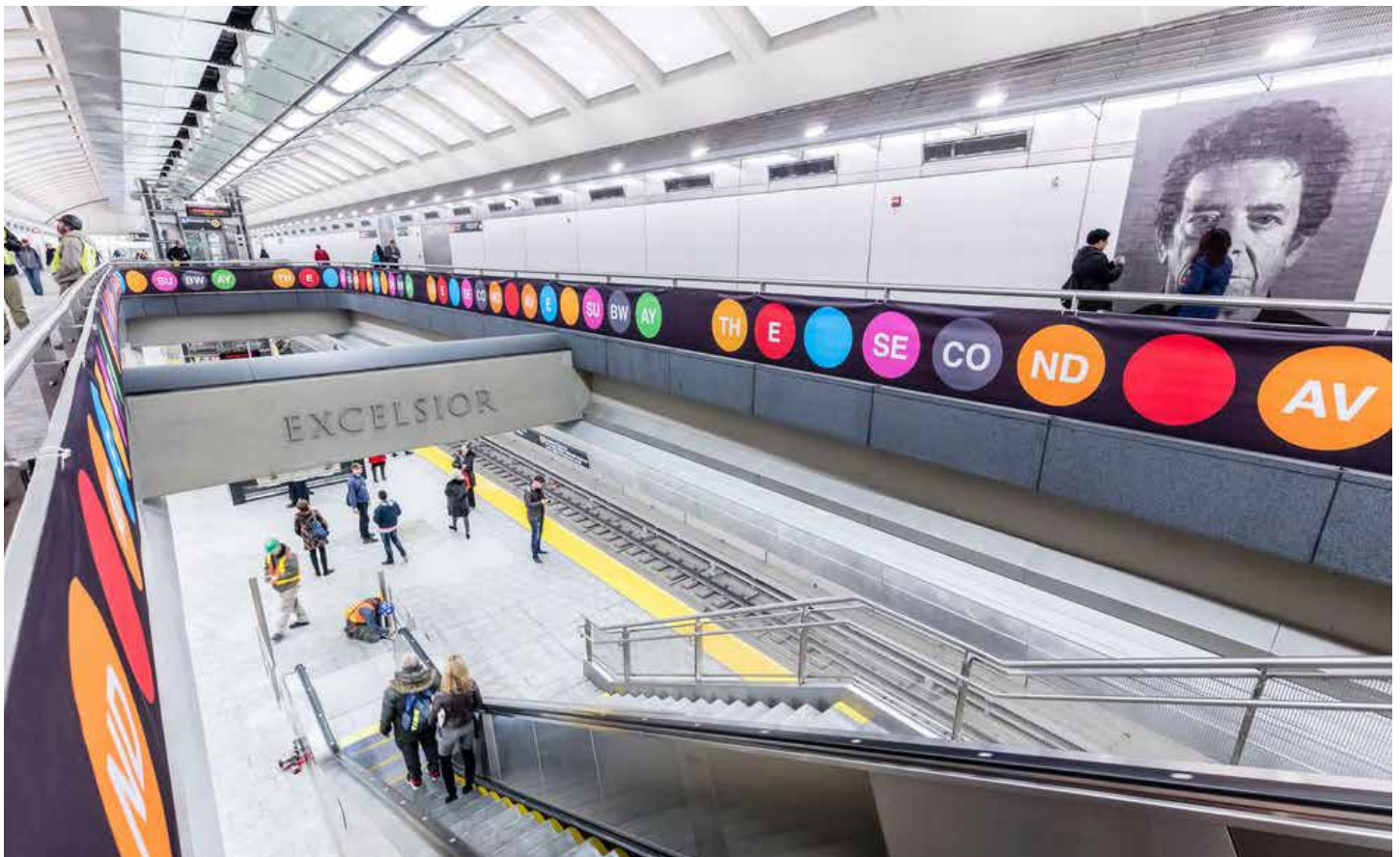


Photo: Lester Burg

The final works represent the dedication and hard work of numerous parties including Close, Magnolia Editions, Mosaika Art & Design, Lester Burg of the MTA, and installer Mike Minna, whose use of tonal grout in between the tiles to retain image integrity proved an ingenious final touch. Magnolia Editions also supplied large-scale prints of Close images (a self-portrait and portraits of artists Zhang Huan and Sienna Shields) for Mosaika's use in creating their glass and ceramic translations for *Subway Figures*. ■



Detail view of Lou Reed portrait from *Subway Figures* showing tonal grout used by installer Mike Minna between the tiles to retain image integrity; photo by Donald Farnsworth.



Installation view of ceramic portrait of Lou Reed at the Second Ave-86th St Station, from Chuck Close's *Subway Figures*. Photo by Max Touhey.