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Amy Trachtenberg on the Milpitas BART platform during the installation of her new work, “Ecstatic Voyaging.”

S.F. artist goes underground with ‘ecstatic’ BART art installation

BY LAURA PAULL | JULY 1, 2021

When Amy Trachtenberg was a student at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris 40 years ago, she fell in love ... with the city’s grand 19th- and 20th-century train stations. Intrigued by the interface of transit hubs with the human experience of rail travel, she chose to write her thesis on that topic.

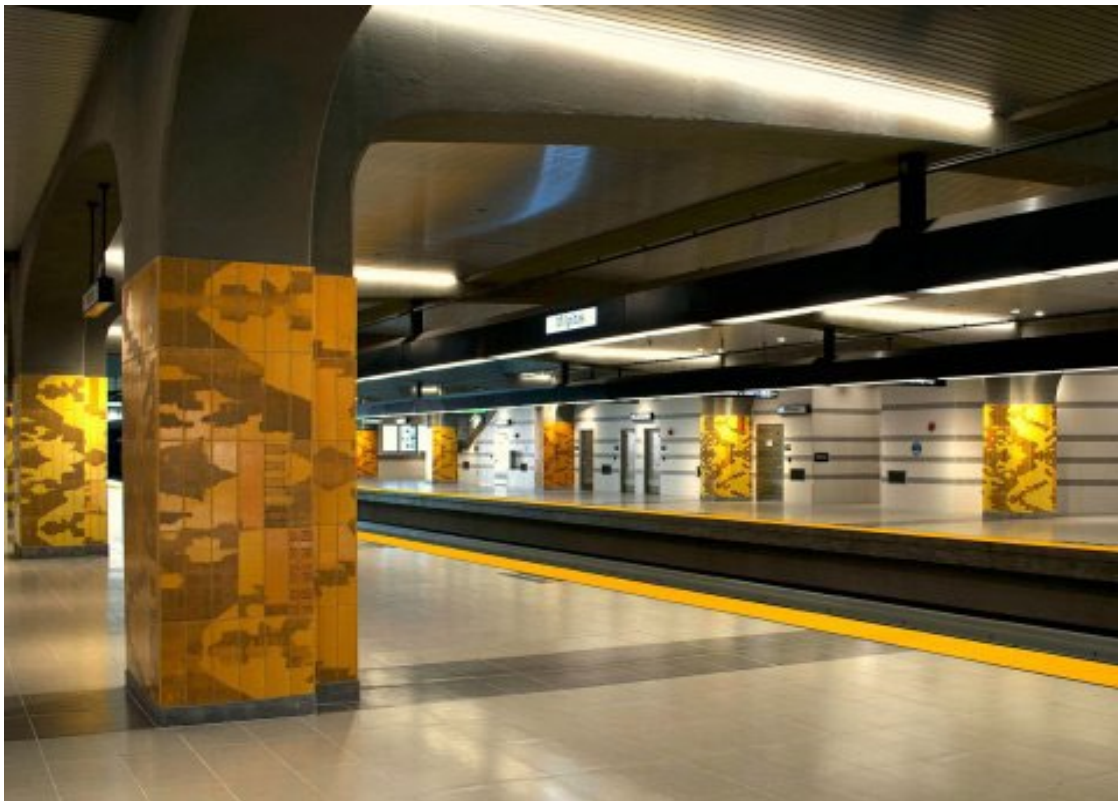
Decades later, the San Francisco artist has had the opportunity to shape the aesthetic of a train station close to home: the new BART station in Milpitas.

Commissioned to create a work of public art, Trachtenberg emerged with an installation that can be seen on 20 structural columns on the platform.

“I’ve always been intrigued by columns and pillars as sculptural objects,” she says, recalling those she viewed while living in France and on visits to temples and sacred sites in India, North Africa, Mexico and Southeast Asia. (It is a focus she previously explored in “Groundwork,” a 2007 commission for a library in San Jose.)

The sleek station opened in June 2020 to a much diminished commuter load because of the pandemic. Now, with things on the move again, BART passengers will encounter bright columns adorned with tiles in warm colors evoking spices such as saffron and turmeric.

Embedded in the color scheme is a pattern that results from a weaving technique known as *ikat*, which Trachtenberg chose after researching the community the station would largely serve.



Amy Trachtenberg’s “Ecstatic Voyaging” is an installation of patterned ceramic tiles on the columns of the Milpitas BART station.



Milpitas, a city of 80,000, contains a patchwork of national and ethnic identities, and some 40 languages are spoken by its residents. Trachtenberg often integrates textiles into her formal mixed-media work, and it occurred to her that ikat could speak to that diversity and provide a unifying motif.

A soft, energetic zigzag design, ikat appears in textiles indigenous to Indonesia, Central America, Africa, Asia and Eurasia.

“It is an ancient and very complex weaving form, recognizable in many cultures,” she says. “The word *ikat* literally means ‘to tie and to bind.’”

A local ceramics company, Fireclay Tile, helped Trachtenberg magnify her ikat designs to create an intricate layout of custom-glazed tiles that wrap around the station’s eight-sided columns. On the platform, they stand like exclamation marks, and seen from the windows of a moving BART train, they “become more of an environment, a kinetic experience in which the viewer, not the artwork, is moving,” she says.

She named the work “Ecstatic Voyaging,” a favored phrase of the French poet Charles Baudelaire.

Because the new line extension (to Milpitas and Berryessa/North San Jose) finally puts BART into Silicon Valley, the artist layered a contemporary element into her ikat design: the lines and patterns formed in the silicon chip.

“People working in the tech industry recognize the computer imagery ... in the tiles,” Trachtenberg says.

Born and reared in Pittsburgh, Trachtenberg is the granddaughter of Eastern European Jews. Her father, Allen, sold men’s clothing as a traveling salesman and moved the family of seven to California to take advantage of this state’s public education system. (Trachtenberg earned her bachelor’s degree in French and liberal studies at Sonoma State University before heading to Paris.) Her mother, Mitzi, was a visual artist who specialized in collage.

Amy Trachtenberg integrated patterns of silicon chip circuitry with ancient ikat textile patterns to make the designs for “Ecstatic Voyaging,” the new installation at the Milpitas BART station.

“I come from textiles,” Trachtenberg says. “Many generations of the men in my family were *shmatte* salesmen, and I grew up playing with books of fabric swatches. My maternal grandmother sewed dresses for my sister and me from scraps.”

Trachtenberg has had works in a long list of shows, including the 2015 “Found/Made” group exhibit at the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles and a 2019 solo show at the Luggage Store Gallery in San Francisco.

Currently, her works are part of two group shows: “Break and Bleed” at the San Jose Museum of Art and “Open Field” at the Catharine Clark Gallery in San Francisco. The latter exhibit, in part, pays homage to the German Jewish refugee and Bauhaus artist Anni Albers and the late Bay Area sculptor Ruth Asawa. Trachtenberg’s contribution is a new work made from deconstructed bras that are painted, knotted and tied into a suspended structure.

“In this piece, and all of my work that includes cloth and found material, the human presence is there via the inclusion of everyday objects,” she says.

She also has a work-in-progress on the facade of the new C.G. Jung Institute building in San Francisco. It’s done in ceramic tile and it’s based on a motif “borrowed from quilts and embroidery,” she says.

No one can predict how long into the future the new Milpitas BART station will be in use, but the ceramic tiles in the station’s construction and in Trachtenberg’s “Ecstatic Voyaging” could last more than 100 years, says Jennifer Easton, BART’s art program manager.

“If the goal of BART and the VTA [Valley Transit Authority] is to provide a democratic transit system for all,” Trachtenberg says, “mine was to express how this station finally unites the diverse peoples of the Greater Bay Area and their myriad reasons for travel.”

“Ecstatic Voyaging” at Milpitas BART station, 1755 S. Milpitas Blvd.

<https://jweekly.com/2021/07/01/s-f-artist-goes-underground-with-ecstatic-bart-art-installation/>