

Art installations soothe delays at SFO

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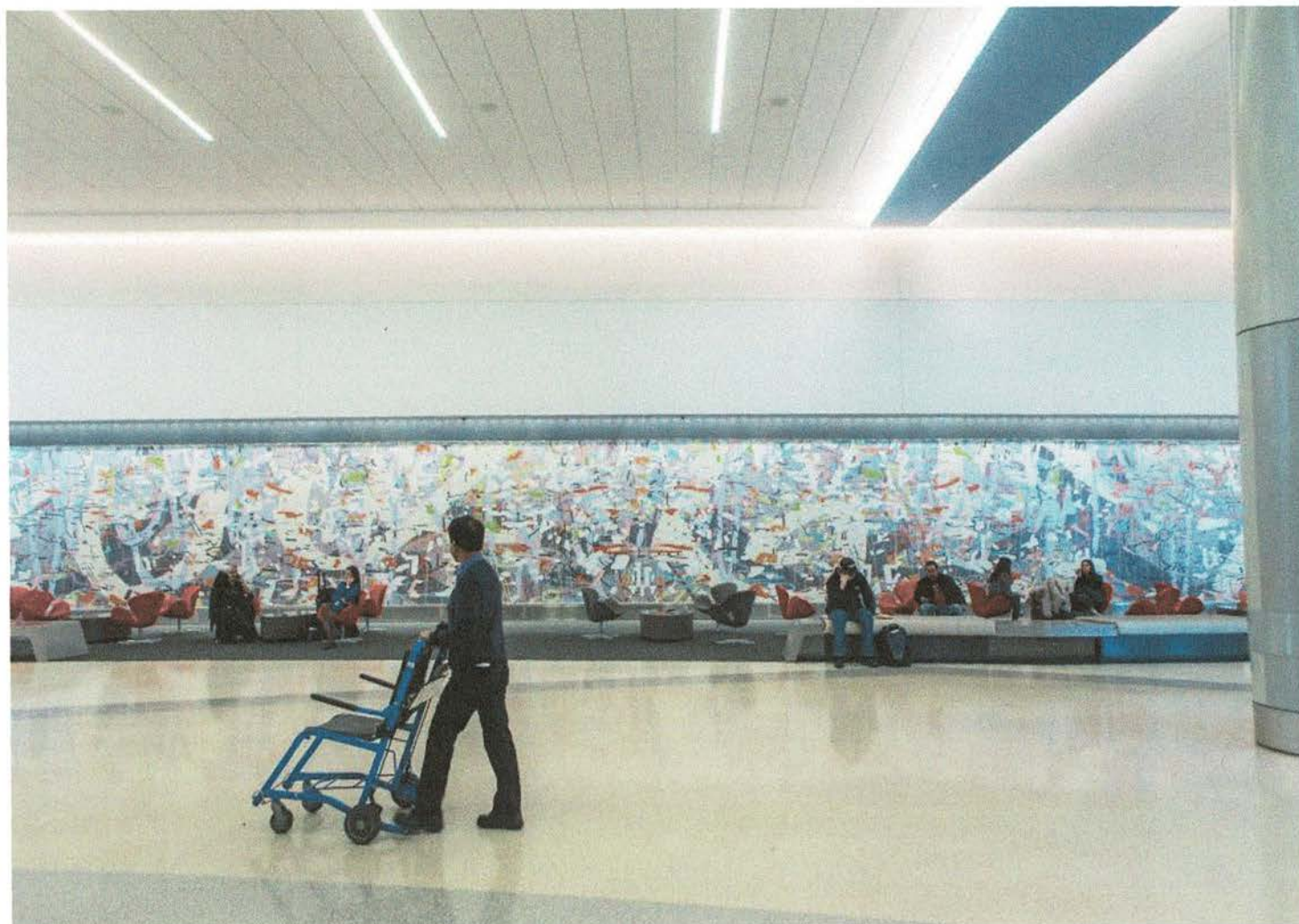


Photo: Nathaniel Y. Downes, The Chronicle

A man pushing a wheel chair looks at the 109-foot installation by artist Amy Ellingson at San Francisco International Airport on Thursday, Dec. 10, 2015 in San Francisco, Calif.

Just in from Sydney and headed to Costa Rica, Mariana Baltodano and her 2-year-old son, Lucas, were on a 28-hour journey that had just been extended to 32. She desperately needed to be soothed and there it was right in front of her — a 110-foot mural that would take her four hours to figure out, the estimated length of her delay.

“The artwork is energizing,” Baltodano says, surveying the full curving span of 100,000 ceramic tiles, in 60 colors, assembled by Amy Ellingson. Called “Untitled (Large Variation),” the abstract mosaic is one of six new permanent installations commissioned, purchased and installed in November by the San Francisco Arts Commission.

The art is funded by the “percent-for-art” program, which specifies that an amount equal to 2 percent of the budget for any major construction project in the city be contributed to the Civic Art Collection. The budget for expansion and renovation of Terminal 3 East (United) was \$253 million, which freed up \$1.7 million to decorate it with art.

Locations of the works were figured into the design, and the artists were selected by jury from hundreds of applicants nationwide. Most of the winners are Bay Area-based, though the names suggest exotic travel — Ursula von Rydingsvard, Louisiana Bendolph, Sanaz Mazinani, Vanessa Marsh and Lordy Rodriguez.

The works range from heroic sculpture to a Gee’s Bend quilt replicated in tile, but only Ellingson got this much wall space along with an entire lounge color-coordinated to her work.

“This is a massive risk that the Arts Commission was willing to take on me,”

says Ellingson, who is 51 and describes herself as a “conceptual formalist.” She just sold 50 works on paper to SFMOMA but has never before done a permanent public installation, let alone one that is 1,100 square feet. “They could have hired someone who has done 10 of these or 50 of these,” she says, “but they want to showcase local artists and give them a chance.”

Airport art is not really intended for people racing through the terminal in a frenzied blur to meet a flight. Airport art, when it works, enjoys a captive audience. And few spots boast an audience more captive than at a United Airlines terminal.

People have time to kill as they await a connecting flight or wait out a delay.

How long a delay? “I’m afraid it might be for life,” says traveler Josiane Keller, who suggested that life spent in Terminal 3 might be preferable to her final destination of Cleveland. Keller is an artist herself and admittedly cranky after a long haul from Kyoto, Japan. Her first impression of Ellingson’s tile work is “it’s not as bad as it could have been,” but the more she looks the more she likes. Another hour or two and she’ll be loving it.

This is the point of the Arts Commission program, which is not to be confused with the constantly rotating exhibitions put on by the SFO Museum. These are display cases filled with collections — ‘60s TV lunch boxes, jukeboxes and the like — usually on loan. Right now the United Terminal has an exhibit of artifacts supplied by the Pro Football Hall of Fame and the 49ers to hype the forthcoming Super Bowl at Levi’s Stadium. The SFO Museum, which is a division of the airport commission, also runs the Louis A. Turpen Aviation Museum in the International Terminal.

The modern art that is fixed on the walls, hanging from the ceiling and standing as sculpture in Terminal 3 is not part of the SFO Museum. It is city-owned public art, though not that public since you must have a boarding pass and clear security in order to visit most of it.

Some of the art you have to look for, because it hangs in corridors that people hurry by, one hand pulling a carry-on and the other checking the iPhone. Some art hangs above tables where people open laptops. Rodriguez's series of San Francisco fantasy maps hangs downstairs at luggage claim, right next to the "Welcome to San Francisco," greeting by Mayor Ed Lee.

"They just really reinforce each other," says Susan Pontious, director of the Civic Art Collection and Public Art Program, admiring the placement.

The best location is for Ellingson's mural, in a rest area at the confluence of arrival gates, across from the United customer service desk and next to Peet's.

"I'm coming from here and going to there," says Keller in explaining her stop, "and this is in the middle."



Photo: Nathaniel Y. Downes, The Chronicle

Airport security bikes pass an installation by artists Seiji Kunishima and Marc Katano.

Nearby is Jeannie Fitzpatrick, headed home to Florida after a week of wine-tasting. Arriving early as she was trained to do, she is drawn to this carpeted living room, plops on one of the matching orange Swan chairs by Arne Jacobsen and does not expect to move for a while.

“Art keeps people calm. Caaallllmmmm,” says Fitzpatrick, who was a flight attendant for American Airlines for 15 years. She has seen some airport art, but she has never seen any art in any airport as elaborate as the mural she is staring at.

Patience is what all these travelers need and Ellingson is standing by to administer it. She got the commission five years ago, and was just about ready to begin production when construction plans changed and her location was switched from a floor to a wall.



Photo: Nathaniel Y. Downes, The Chronicle

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A passenger leaving the terminal passes an installation by artist Ursula von Rydingsvard at San Francisco International Airport on Thursday, Dec. 10, 2015 in San Francisco, Calif.

This caused her to start all over again. Then the creation took three years in her Bayview

studio and twice she risked airport delays herself, flying to Montreal to make sure her tiles were glazed, cut and placed properly.

“I’m less interested in a message than an experience,” says Ellingson. “I don’t think I can prescribe what that experience is for someone else.”

But she can prescribe the experience of seeing all of this exposure to her art.

“It’s a much bigger audience than the normal gallery show receives,” she says, in understatement. “Seven million people pass through here every year.”

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