

Art That Might Make You Want to Go to La Guardia

Terminal B opens Saturday with public works by Sarah Sze, Laura Owens, Sabine Hornig and Jeppe Hein.



By Hilarie M. Sheets

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If you want to visit an art gallery in New York anytime soon, consider a trip to La Guardia Airport beginning Saturday. That’s the grand opening of its new Terminal B, home to four airlines and interlaced with four sprawling art installations. With three of the four works accessible without a boarding pass, Terminal B just may be the best indoor space for contemporary art — no appointment needed — that the public is welcome to visit in phase one of New York’s reopening.

In the final push to finish construction in the midst of the pandemic this spring, the Public Art Fund joined the pantheon of essential services permitted to continue working on-site by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo. That designation attests to a centerpiece of the design: Art installations knit throughout the architectural fabric of the building, which broke ground four years ago and has crossed the finish line as a glamorous entry portal for the city’s coming back to life.

It’s an unusual moment to be celebrating the opening of an airport, widely feared as sites of contagion in the global spreading of the coronavirus. Even as many states are lifting restrictions on businesses and social gatherings, most Americans are expecting the pandemic to upend summer travel plans. In a Kaiser poll last month, just 23 percent of its respondents said they would be likely to fly in the next three months. In a survey of epidemiologists published Monday by The New York Times, 37 percent said they would wait for at least a year before getting on a plane.

Asked by email if the timing was unfortunate, Mr. Cuomo replied with an upbeat message about the art in a statement to The New York Times.



Ms. Owens put her talents to the test on the largest interior wall in the airport. John Taggart for The New York Times

“As we open a new La Guardia that will serve as a front door to New York for countless visitors and a frequent pass-through for native New Yorkers, these four site-specific works of public art will provide focal points of beauty that reflect the creativity, energy, culture and spirit of the Empire State,” Mr. Cuomo said. “Public art is a key medium to show the world who we are and to say when you come to New York you

will be amazed and inspired.”

The new building, with a soaring light-filled arrivals and departures hall for Air Canada, American Airlines, Southwest Airlines and United Airlines, is part of the overall \$8 billion transformation of the airport by Governor Cuomo and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. A future phase includes a glass-enclosed pedestrian bridge with views of the city. Aircraft will also taxi beneath it.

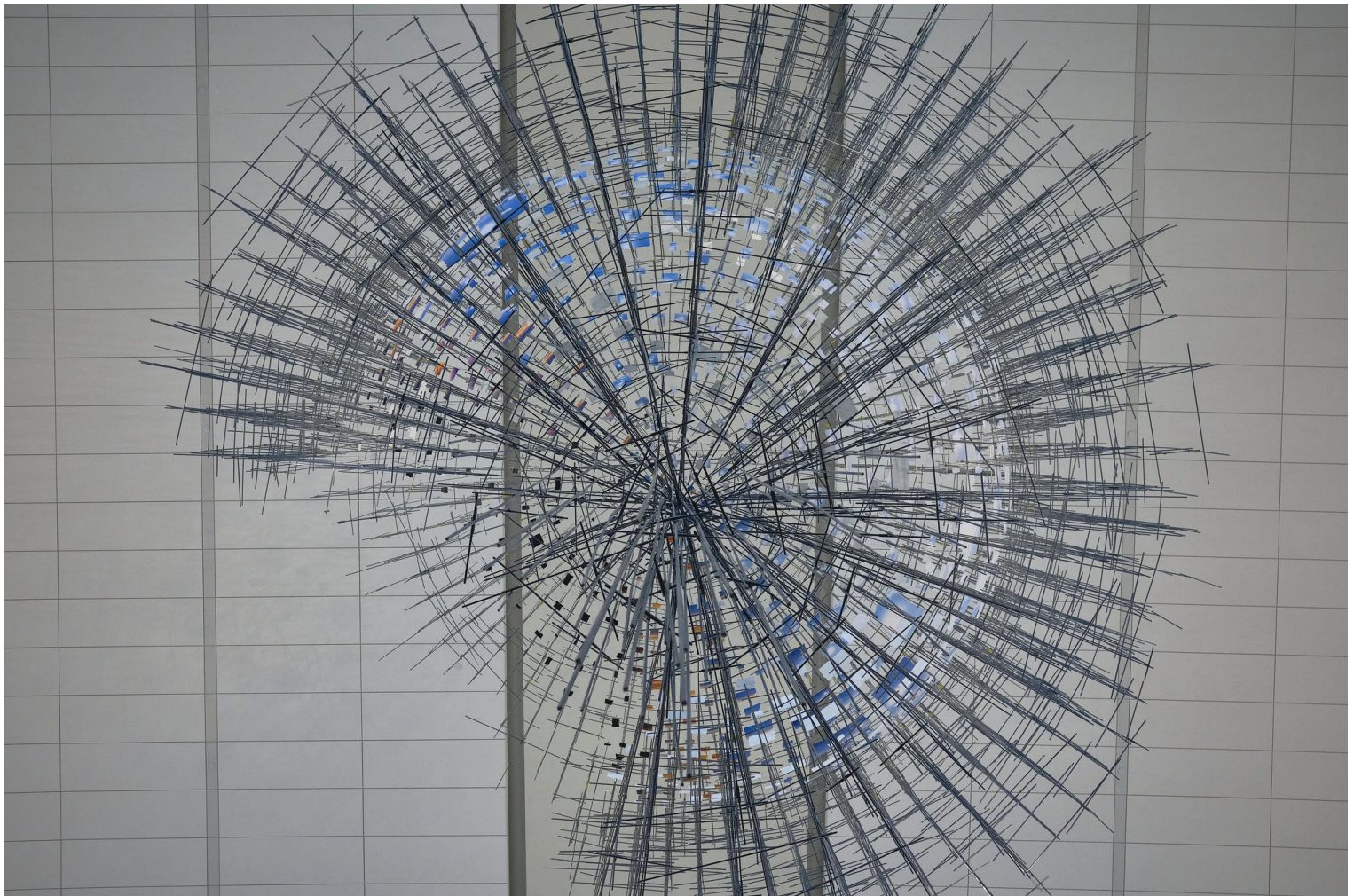
The Public Art Fund teamed with LaGuardia Gateway Partners in 2017 to commission and integrate an art program that would project the vitality of the city. An initial group of 25 artists from 11 countries, including six people of color, was presented by the Public Art Fund and winnowed to 12 by a committee comprising board members of LaGuardia Gateway Partners. Each artist was invited to develop a proposal for one of several prominent locations.

The chosen four include three women; two artists are from Europe, two from America, one of whom identifies as a woman of color. All had to stretch their ways of working to conceive permanent installations that could withstand the vast scale and busy traffic of the terminal — and to execute them with the curve ball of the health crisis that grounded three of the four artists in Europe.

“After being confined in this pandemic and all the crises we’re facing as a society, for New Yorkers especially to see their city celebrated in this way will make people proud,” said Nicholas Baume, director and chief curator of the Public Art Fund. Last week he led a reporter on a tour through the \$10 million art installations. Here’s a close look at the works completed under extraordinary circumstances.

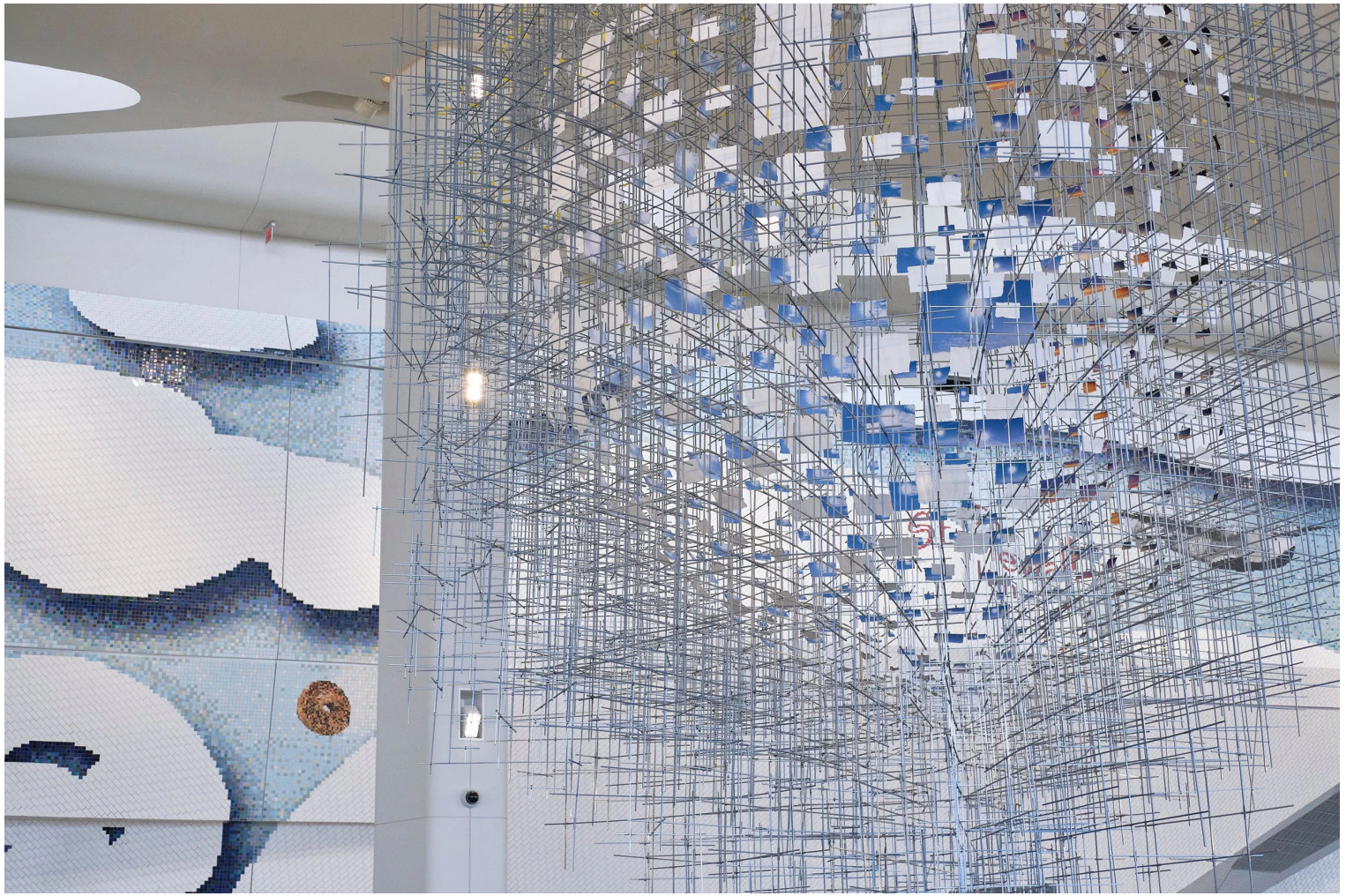
Sarah Sze

The New York-based installation artist Sarah Sze, who represented the United States at the 2013 Venice Biennale, is known for her constellations of everyday materials. Her sculpture here titled “Shorter Than the Day,” after a line in an Emily Dickinson poem, functions almost like a timekeeper. She has engineered a vast matrix of metal rods that cohere into a monumental yet ethereal globe. Suspended from a central spot on the ceiling of the departures level, it descends through a cutaway in the floor and is visible floating overhead from baggage claim.



For “Shorter Than the Day,” Sarah Sze engineered a vast matrix of metal rods that cohere into a monumental yet ethereal globe. John Taggart for The New York Times

Defining the rim of the sphere at the center are more than 900 photographs of the sky in New York, shot over the course of a day as the light moved from dawn to dusk. “When you get on a plane, how do you measure that feeling of shifting time and place,” mused Ms. Sze, adding that she was inspired in part by how the Grand Central Terminal clock has come to define that world famous landmark.




“I really want it to be almost like a mirage,” Ms. Sze said of her work. John Taggart for The New York Times

Ms. Sze was the only artist of the four in New York when travel restrictions were imposed in March and worked on-site with her team through the chaotic early days of the pandemic. She said the piece, which weighs five tons, is one of the most technically complex she’s ever made. “I really want it to be almost like a mirage,” she said of the sculpture — intending that it appear diaphanous and fragile. “It’s always been really interesting to do public art that way because it requires so much of the opposite.”

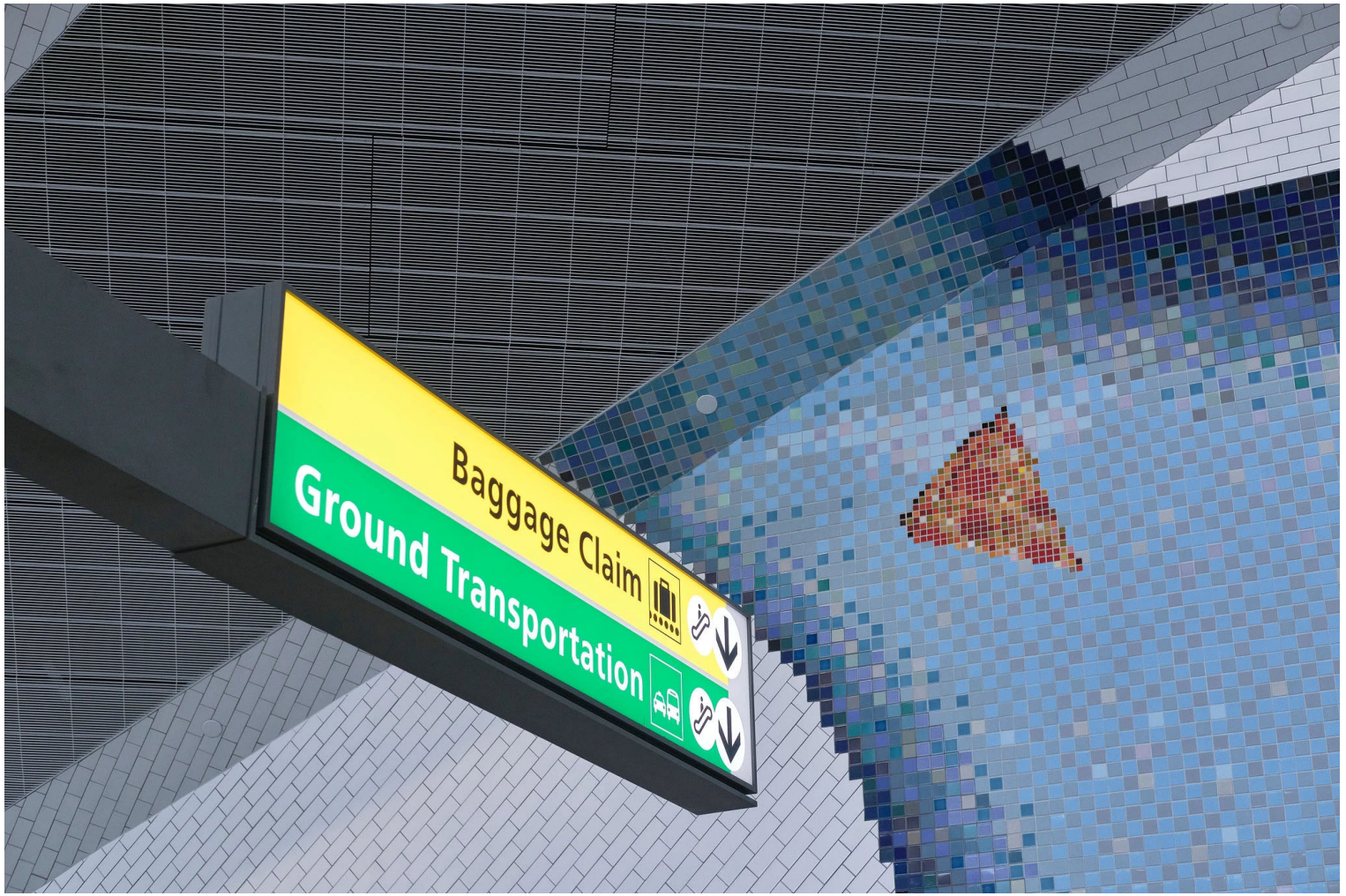
Laura Owens

The Los Angeles-based painter Laura Owens was the subject of a critically acclaimed 2018 survey at the Whitney Museum. She is adept at synthesizing a range of styles, images and techniques in a single canvas and has put her talents to the test on the largest interior wall in the airport.



Laura Owens references the history, monuments and staples of New York in “I  NY.” John Taggart for The New York Times

Working in ceramic tile mosaic for the first time, Ms. Owens has covered nearly 25,000 square feet with massive, buoyant-looking white clouds against a tranquil blue sky. Floating in and around them are 80 images referencing the history, monuments and staples of New York, such as the Unisphere in Queens, signs for the Apollo Theater and the Stonewall Inn, a MetroCard, a hot dog, an ice cream truck. Included is a welcome sign and land acknowledgment in the Lenape dialects of Unami and Munsee as well as English.



Laura Owens's pizza icon pops up in her art installation. John Taggart for The New York Times




Her icons of New York include — what else? — the hot dog. This one is in ceramic. John Taggart for The New York Times



Billowy clouds inside Terminal B by Ms. Owens, and a tribute to the uprising at The Stone Wall Inn that helped launch the gay rights movement. John Taggart for The New York Times

Using more than 625,000 tiles hand laid over nine months, Ms. Owens applied a painterly approach to her new medium by shifting the size and direction of the white tiles for the clouds and setting them in relief with shadows at their edges. The artist has been in lockdown in France since March, working remotely through a volley of photos and videos with installers, to approve every placement.

Mr. Baume calls the piece, titled “I  NY,” a love letter to New York. “Because it’s a skyscape,” he said, “it puts you in the air and turns a landscape with the icons we know from physical space into a kind of wonderful fantasia.”

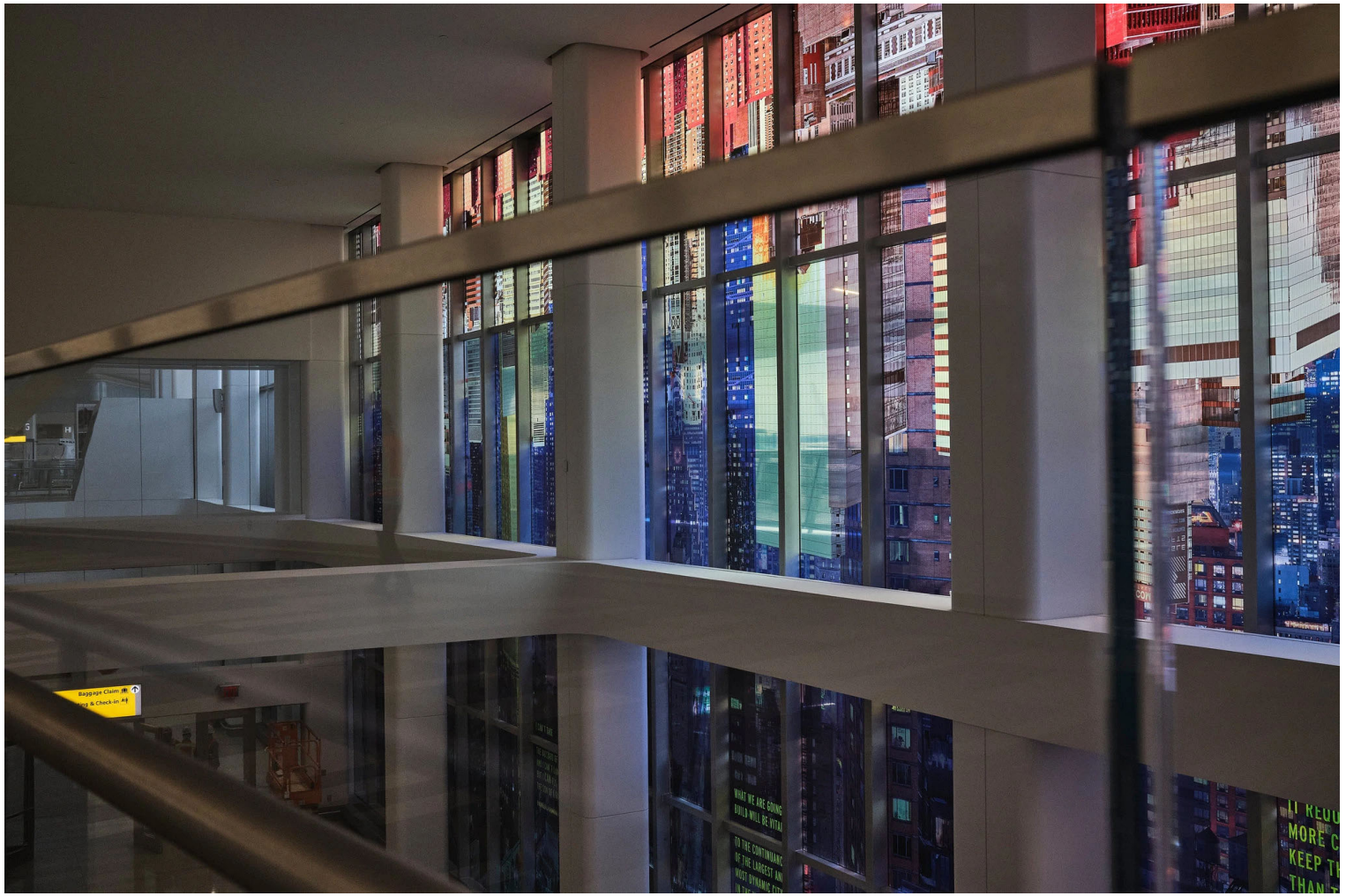
Sabine Hornig

Sabine Hornig, a Berlin-based artist who explores space, perspective and memory in collages of translucent photographs, often applied to windows, has done her largest architectural intervention to date on the glass facade of the passageway to the parking garage. Taking the view of Manhattan’s skyline from La Guardia Airport as a conceptual departure point, Ms. Hornig shot more than 1,100 high-resolution photographs of Manhattan from its rooftops as well as from the waterfront in Queens. She merged the images into a stacked composition that captures the dynamism of the city and plays with proportion and scale.



Sabine Hornig shot more than 1,100 high-resolution photographs of Manhattan from its rooftops as well as from the waterfront in Queens for “La Guardia Vistas.” John Taggart for The New York Times

Radiant skyscrapers in golden morning light descend inverted from the top of the windows running 268 feet long and 42 feet tall. Up-close views of buildings in Van Gogh twilight rise from the floor. The artist has punctuated the interlocking cityscape with 20 quotations by and about Fiorello La Guardia, the airport’s founder and city’s mayor from 1934 to 1945, including: “The war to make the world safe for democracy must not serve as the pretext for the curtailment of the most essential freedoms.”



Ms. Hornig punctuated her work with 20 quotations by and about Fiorello La Guardia. John Taggart for The New York Times

Titled “La Guardia Vistas,” it becomes a stained-glass window bathing the floor and people in its kaleidoscopic wash of color, image and text. “New York is full of opposing perspectives,” Ms. Hornig said. “The skyline incorporates this dream of everyone turning out the best of themselves, the individuality but also the togetherness.”

Jeppe Hein

Jeppe Hein, a Danish artist based in Berlin, has brought his playful interactive sculptures to public spaces around the world. For “All Your Wishes,” he has created a serendipitous trail through Terminal B’s retail space. Arriving at the security check-in, travelers may notice a shiny balloon with a long ribbon dangling from the ceiling, as though lost from a child’s hand.



With “All Your Wishes,” Jeppe Hein has created a serendipitous trail through Terminal B’s retail space. John Taggart for The New York Times



Mr. Hein’s bright red benches are designed to encourage communication between strangers. John Taggart for The New York Times

Enter the concourse, and you are greeted by 70 balloons — actually steel sculptures — in reflective hues that congregate gregariously across the ceiling and snake through the passageways, around the shops and restaurants, by far the biggest public space the artist has tackled. “When people see one, they’ll want to see more and follow them somehow,” said Mr. Hein. “They’re all connected, like we are.”

For the central court, the artist has also made three bright red “modified social benches,” as he calls them, which curve, loop and twist and are designed to encourage communication between strangers. (For now, at least, in the age of social distancing, they are likely to see less action.)

Even in hard times, “All Your Wishes” reflects the promise of the city, Mr. Hein said. “New York is a city with all these colors and energies and wonders, a city of opportunities.”