

Can Public Art Save New York's Grittiest Bus Terminal?

Nine contemporary artists have taken over vacant advertising spaces at the aesthetically beleaguered Port Authority.



Billie Anania December 27, 2022



Pamela Council's "Talking Hands" mural is one of several new works on view at Port Authority. (Billy Anania/Hyperallergic)

New York City's Port Authority building has never really been known for its good looks. Rather, the Midtown bus terminal has garnered a reputation for its chaotic grit — and the overwhelming feeling that, at

any moment, your bus might leave without you.

In the last few years, however, leadership has been working with local arts organizations to improve aesthetic conditions for the 225,000+ commuters who pass through each day. The most recent effort from Times Square Arts invited contemporary artists from its *Midnight Moment* series to adapt billboard-size artworks into murals across 11 vacant advertising spaces at the terminal. Works by contributing artists Pamela Council, Chitra Ganesh, Cory Arcangel, Takeshi Murata, Shantell Martin, Zina Saro-Wiwa, Jennifer West, Krista Kim, and Jeffrey Gibson are on view across two floors of Port Authority's North and South wings through April 2023.



Chitra Ganesh's "Scorpion Gesture" mural (Billy Anania/Hyperallergic)

While these works once adorned gigantic screens along Broadway, their pared-down renderings are a welcome sight among outdated and overly patriotic displays. In her mural, Council portrays manicured hands tugging at a telephone cord, reflecting a project she made using 350,000 acrylic nails; two feline paintings by Jennifer West bring to mind the ubiquity of bodega cats. Around the corner, Ganesh's "Scorpion Gesture" piece appears alongside technicolor floral ripples by Murata, though the dynamic visuals are obstructed by an NYPD temporary inspection station installed directly in front of them.

These interactive murals all commemorate the 10-year anniversary of *Midnight Moment*, which brings original artworks to digital billboards at Times Square every night between 11:57 pm and 12:00 am. Many of them were painted directly on the exposed-brick walls, and each stands at about nine feet tall with QR codes linking to videos from their original presentation.



Works by Zina Saro-Wiwa (left) and Takeshi Murata (right) (courtesy Times Square Arts)

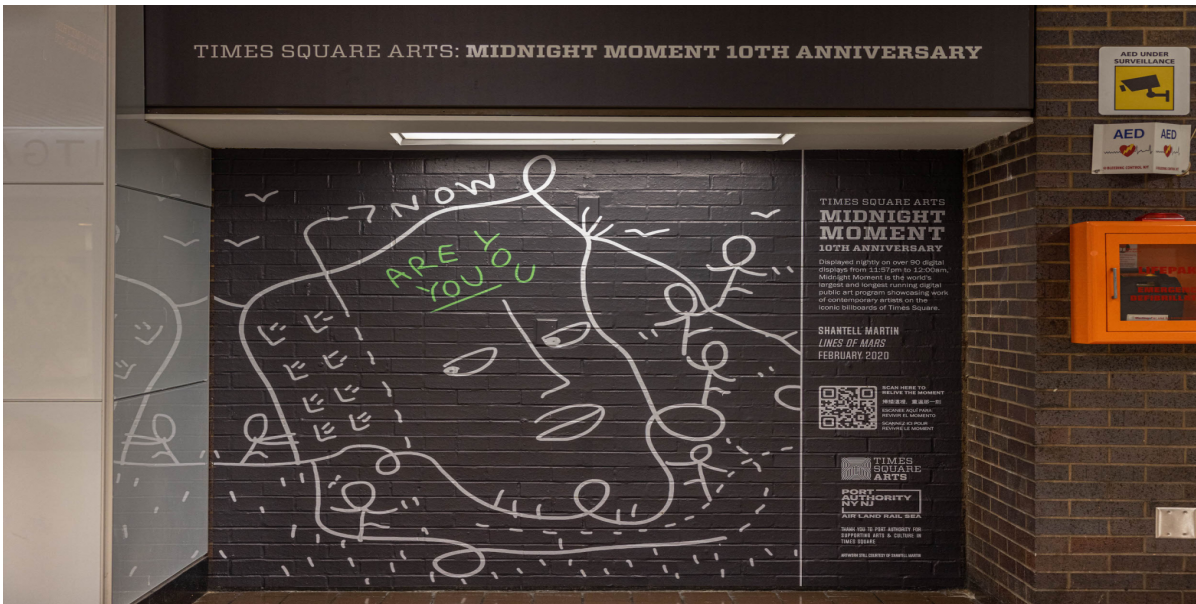
For Times Square Arts Director Jean Cooney, collaborating with Port Authority furthers the organization’s strategy to stage artistic interventions in venues once occupied by advertising — which has previously included storage containers, bus shelters, and trash compactors.

“If we don’t always have time as New Yorkers to go experience art ourselves, it should at least be our responsibility to ensure that art is available throughout the landscape of our city,” Cooney told *Hyperallergic*.

Other murals show the *Midnight Moment* displays as they did during their debut, which Cooney describes as “canyon shots.” Works by Arcangel and Kim show towering skyscrapers lit up along Broadway and 42nd Street; notably, their photographic depth adds dimension to the somewhat claustrophobic Port Authority hallways. Likewise, Saro-Wiwa’s “Table Manners” portrays Nigerian dining traditions along the corner of a building looking upward, making the compact alcove appear more expansive.

At the terminal during rush hour, commuters largely sprint past the pieces to catch the next bus, but many do stop to take a quick look. One commuter told *Hyperallergic* that the artworks are “far better than just another ad,” while a Port Authority worker noted that the murals provide a “sense of calm” in an otherwise hectic space. This aspect, Cooney claims, cannot be emphasized enough.

“It seems like a faceless, bureaucratic space, but the Port Authority building actually has real people working there who walk the terminals every day and take good care of them,” she said. “Hopefully, this is helping to freshen up the area for everyone.”



One of Shantell Martin's murals