



## WORDS BY AHMED DIALDIN

An art program was launched last year to shape London's cultural landscape where you wouldn't expect at first, but where it will make a world of a difference to the millions of people that will pass through it every single day: the new Crossrail subway line currently in construction.

We are creatures blessed to live beneath an infinite sky and unimagined heights beyond, which provides us the light and warmth of the sun, and a veritably endless space for all the air we breath. But, more so, as we gaze up at the stars, dreaming of the unimaginable, we gain something powerful; we gain a sense of the infinite, of possibilities without limits, of the potential to exceed. However, take us below, underground into the darkness, and one can't help but feel that sense of infinite stifled out of them, replaced by a sense of foreboding; of narrowness and tightness; of limits and ends. It feels unnatural, not to have any sense of the sky above you. And yet, in many parts of the world, we go down deep below every single day of our lives and ride through an incredible maze of tunnels. In all the rush of getting from one point to another, or more likely, as creatures of habit, we won't notice what's missing, but we'll feel it all the same.

There is hope, though. There are people who seek to create beauty where there is none. To live their lives dedicated to leaving it more beautiful than when they came into it. They see a space void of nature, a space of darkness, and they yearn to breathe life and light into it. Amongst all the bedrock and metal of a subway station, they still see the sky, they still see the infinite and they strive to bring that to us in whatever form they can imagine.

Subway art has been around for quite a while, and you can find breathtaking projects in Paris, Lisbon, Moscow, Berlin, Warsaw, Naples, and most famously of all, Stockholm, with about 110 kilometers and more than 90 of their 100 subway stations decorated with sculptures, mosaics, paintings, installations, engravings and reliefs by over 150 artists. Now, London is getting in on the action with their Crossrail Art Programme, which is a master stroke of effort and imagination.

After planning for about 35 years, London finally began work on adding the Crossrail subway line to their famous underground system. By the time of its completion in 2018, Crossrail will pass through 37 stations and run over 100 kilometers

# Underground ART



Images: Canary Wharf Station - architects.impression

from Maidenhead and Heathrow in the west to Shenfield and Abbey Wood in the east. Most of the route will use existing tunnels, but they will be constructing 42 kilometers of new tunnel, easing congestion and greatly improving journey times across London.

What's unique about this construction project is the art program attached to it. The new Crossrail stations at Paddington, Bond Street, Tottenham Court Road, Farringdon, Liverpool Street, Whitechapel, Canary Wharf and Custom House will each be represented by its own London-based art gallery, who in turn will be collaborating with a leading contemporary artist. The galleries for the first five stations have been chosen, which are, in respect to the above order: Lisson Gallery, White Cube, Gagosian Gallery, Sadies Coles HQ, and Victoria Miro.

While each artist and gallery will work to create their own unique vision for their station, three approaches have been set to begin with and develop from. Through Art & Architecture, artists will work with the architects and engineers of the station to seamlessly integrate their art with the design and even building materials used for the station. The River of Light style takes a more modern approach by focusing upon

integrating digital technologies and creating digital art, as well as lighting installations. Finally, The Urban Gallery will be more personal to the station's specific location, playing off that particular neighborhood, community, and architecture.

When all is said and done, this section of the line will become one long art gallery in and of itself, each station representing a different room or hall that showcases its own art installation.

Taking things a step further, last May Crossrail launched the Artist in Residence program, providing artists the opportunity to use Europe's largest construction project and its workers as their muses to inspire creative art. Hand in hand with that announcement came the unveiling of the first work to be birthed of this exceptional union, London sculptor Frank Harris's Bird Nest installation. He took 1.5 tons of fifty million year old clay that was dug up during the construction of the tunnels, and mixed it with straw and sand to create an installation out of cob, a type of building material that has been used since prehistoric times to make shelters.

It's been great using Crossrail clay, seeing exactly where it's from and thinking about its history. It's exciting to think about what the world may have been like when this clay was formed," said Frank Harris.

In March, Lisson Gallery had chosen the artist to work on Paddington Station: American contemporary artist Spencer Finch. Finch's proposal, A Cloud Index, aims to provide what everyone yearns for after spending any amount of time underground: a beautifully bright sky of clouds. Using the new station's 120 meter-long glass canopy as his canvas, and the melding of scientific method with artistic poetry as his personal style, Finch will create a traditional sky landscape that renders an authentic classification of more than 25 types of clouds. It will be a subtle and yet dramatic work for all the light and beauty and comfort that it provides to those that walk beneath it.

"I am thrilled about this project," said Finch. "No one believes me when I say this, but English clouds are really different from American clouds. They are closer to the horizon, denser, and move across the sky differently. I am so excited to have this opportunity to get to know these English clouds and do something beautiful with them on a grand scale. The opportunity to work on a cloud piece at this scale is totally irresistible, and I am confident that the subtlety and complexity of this project will enhance the experience of the beautiful new Paddington Crossrail station."

It is inspiring and heartening to know that, once this incredible project is complete, whenever we find ourselves deep in the depths of this part of London and not able to look up and see the sky, we shall still be able to see something just as beautiful.

We shall see the infinite.