

Art On The Fly

At Bush IAH, a rush of public art greets those coming and going



Photo courtesy Dixie Friend Gay



THE GEORGE BUSH Intercontinental Airport Houston may not boast cutting-edge architecture, but it does have an art collection that's worth taking a look at. Art collection, you ask? Well, yes. Surprisingly enough, there are moments during the travails of travel when it's possible to find a moment to enjoy a work of art, and even to find that art a welcome diversion from the stress of a journey. Over the last few years, the Houston Airport System (HAS), often with the help of the City of Houston and Harris County's Civic Art Fund, has put together one of the city's better selections of public artworks. Many of these works are by some of Texas' most renowned contemporary artists, and they creatively tackle the challenges that today's air travel, security issues, and resulting architectural requirements pose.

While Bush Intercontinental opened in 1969, it wasn't until almost three decades

later, in the late 1990s, that art became a real consideration. The first serious round of commissions were for Terminals A and B, and included such notable works as Dixie Friend Gay's 73-foot-long glass mosaic *Houston Bayou* and Terry Allen's metal sculpture *Countryside Music*. Filled with local flora and fauna, *Houston Bayou* greets visitors along the wavy walls of a walkway that connects Terminal B to a parking garage. *Countryside Music*, a 25-foot cast bronze tree in Terminal A, surprises passersby who don't expect to see such a tree in an airport concourse, much less one that pipes out tunes by Joe Ely and David Byrne. Other art commissioned for Terminals A and B include Leamon Green's *Passing Through*, which fills the glass walls connecting a garage to Terminal A with etched drawings of travelers passing through different parts of the world, and Rachel Hecker's kite-box-

inspired cladding and cobalt-blue downlighting at two elevator bays in Terminal B, which turns the bays into a pair of memorable monolithic guardians.

As intriguing as these pieces can be, and as well as they take on the challenges that airport architectural requirements can present, they are nonetheless scattered. On its official map of airport artworks, HAS shows four artworks in Terminal A, two in Terminal B, one in Terminal C (David Adickes' sculpture of the airport's namesake, George H.W. Bush), and two in Terminal D. It is only in Terminal E, which opened in 2003 and 2004, and the adjacent International Arrivals Building, which opened last year, that the number of artworks explode. Continental Airlines and HAS set out simultaneously to build Terminal E and the International Arrivals Building, and these two large projects created opportunities for a number of different artworks. Once again, the City of Houston and Harris County helped through the Civic Arts Fund, while the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County aided in the selection process by putting forward the names of artists for Continental and HAS to consider.

The first piece to go in was the Art Guys' elliptical *Video Ring* in the Terminal E concourse. It's a "ta-da" kind of work, animating a dramatic and soaring oval-shaped space, a rare architectural flourish in the airport's campus of build-

ings. *Video Ring* turns entering Terminal E into a grand event. For an airport setting, *Video Ring* is an ambitious work in scale, media, and upkeep. Monitor after monitor, one after the other, circles the space overhead, with video and sound programming streaming through them all. To its credit, Continental Airlines has embraced the piece, the artists report, maintaining it, taking care of technical difficulties when they arise, and proving to be admirable custodians of the work.

Not all of the new pieces are so grand in scale or design. Leslie Elkins' and Bert Samples' *Passages 1, 2, 3, and 4* sneak up on you, making their discovery all the more rewarding. As you walk through the glassed-in walkways that form the "secure and sterile" corridors between Terminals D and E, you find yourself surrounded on both sides by celestial drawings etched into the glass. As the patterns ease you through these bridge-like corridors, suddenly your carry-on luggage seems a little bit lighter. You also can enjoy the etchings from your car as you drive underneath them, should you find yourself circling the airport waiting for an arrival.

For those who have to endure the International Arrivals lobby, with its total lack of seating, much less a convenient display offering information on the status of the flight you're awaiting, Jim Hirschfield and Sony Ishii have created *Beads*, a family of enormous, toy-like abstract figures. It's the lone high point



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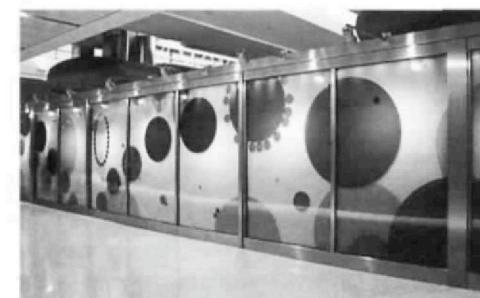
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BY LYNN M. HERBERT

in this otherwise aggravating space. The work's over-the-top playfulness helps keep the blood pressure down.

Behind the electronic doors in the International Arrivals lobby, the experience for the arriving visitor is one of extreme highs and lows. First comes the cavernous passport control hall, like so many the world over. Exhausted from a long flight and fighting jet lag, you have to stand in an endlessly weaving line, often for an hour or more. This would have been the perfect spot to welcome world travelers to Houston, to get things off on the right foot, so to speak. It is a real chamber of commerce opportunity. However, in Houston's passport hall there is no art; there is nothing to welcome the weary vagabond.

Almost as if to make up for this unduly unpleasant experience, once your passport is stamped you proceed to a baggage claim area that is, by comparison, like entering a magical kingdom. It is as energized, colorful, and welcoming as the passport control hall is depressing and drab. On the surrounding walls are Sandra Fiedorek's *One Bounce, Two Bounces*, a suite of brightly colored screened prints on glass that feature a series of circular forms. Embraced by Fiedorek's Pop Art-like grid of balls, you enter into a symphony of color to discover the Art Guys' *Travel Light*, an installation of hundreds of cast-resin, LED-illuminated "suitcases" that sit atop the 12

baggage carousels. Waiting for luggage has never been so enjoyable. The carpeting under the suitcases features blown-up images of stars and galaxies taken from Hubble telescope photographs, a play on an earlier Art Guys' work, *Suitcase in Space: A Tribute to Lost Luggage*. The *Travel Light* suitcases, filled with color and light, blink on and off and make you feel as if they are dancing all around you. Unfortunately, HAS has not been as good a custodian of this art as Continental has been of *Video Ring*. The artists prepared a program that choreographs the entire room of suitcases so that they all work together to create a whole (rather than the random blinking that exists at the moment), but HAS has yet to install the

electrical wiring that would make this possible. Perhaps someday we will see *Travel Light* in its full glory, but already it is a welcoming installation.

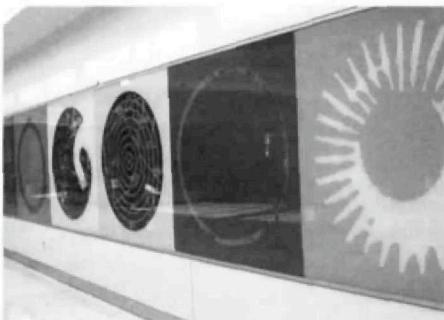
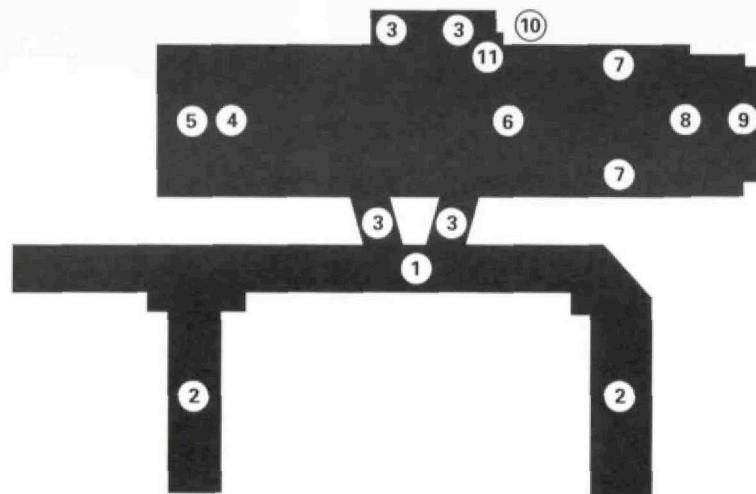
These are just a few of the new artworks in Terminal E and the International Arrivals Building. Not all of the art at the airport is in public access areas, and travelers tend to see only the works in the terminals their flights arrive at or leave from. For those wanting to gain access to the complete collection, tours are available. A guide to Bush IAH's collection, as well as more information about the tours and the artists, can be found at www.fly2houston.com. If travel is in your future, the Houston airport may have some pleasant surprises in store for you. ■

Opposite page, top left: *Houston Bayou* by Dixie Friend Gay, located in the Terminal B garage walkway.

Opposite page, top right: A passenger walks past *Passing Through* by Leamon Green in the Terminal A garage walkway.

Opposite page, bottom, and below: The art at Bush Intercontinental Airport Houston's Terminal E and International Arrivals Building, by the numbers:

- 1) *Video Ring* by the Art Guys.
- 2) *Untitled* by Peter Max.
- 3) *Passages 1, 2, 3, & 4* by Leslie Elkins and Bert Samples.
- 4) *Beads* by Jim Hirschfield and Sony Ishii.
- 5) *Leopard Sky* by Sheila Klein.
- 6) *Air Draps* by Kate Petley.
- 7) *One Bounce, Two Bounces ...* by Sandra Fiedorek.
- 8) *Travel Light* by the Art Guys.
- 9) *Skywall* by Bill FitzGibbons.
- 10) *Time Line* by Ben Waitena.
- 11) *Galaxy Way* by Rolando Briseño.



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Photo courtesy the Art Guys

All photos courtesy Houston Airport System, except where noted.