

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Icons of Bronx History Are Honored in Rico Gatson's New York Subway Murals

Figures like Justice Sonia Sotomayor, James Baldwin, and Maya Angelou's take center stage in the artist's new MTA mosaics for the 167th Street station.

By Zachary Small



*Beacons* (2018) at 167th Street Station, commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts & Design; J. Gil Scott-Heron portrait derived from a photograph by Paul Natkin (all images courtesy MTA, © Rico Gatson)

Portraits of celebrated Black and Latino figures radiate sunbeams of golden light in Rico Gatson's recently unveiled glass mosaics at the 167th Street B D subway station in the Bronx. Eight figures from the borough's history are present in the artist's suite of murals, which aims to "reflect the spirit and energy of the community," according to an MTA spokesperson.

The four men and four women chosen for the project include Gil Scott-Heron, Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Reggie Jackson, and Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

"These individuals have had an influence on the community in the Bronx or have attained international acclaim for their cultural, political, and artistic contributions," Gatson explained to Hyperallergic over email. "Furthermore, each subject has impacted me and my worldview by shaping how I think about art and politics."



*Beacons* (2018) at 167th Street Station, commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts & Design; Audre Lorde portrait derived from a photograph by Jack Mitchell (image courtesy MTA, © Rico Gatson)

The artist, who resides in Brooklyn, chose to include figures from Bronx history who have garnered international acclaim and notoriety throughout their lives. For example, Justice Sotomayor was raised in the South and East Bronx’s Puerto Rican communities. The first Hispanic federal judge in New York State history, Sotomayor returned to the Bronx as an adult to live within her district. A diehard Yankees fan, her mural at 167th Street is situated only blocks away from her beloved baseball team’s stadium.

While some of Gatson’s subjects are not Bronx natives like Sotomayor, they have undoubtedly impacted the borough’s history and culture. With strong ties to his Harlem neighborhood, James Baldwin is

an obvious example. But the novelist did attend DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx’s Bedford Park section. There, he founded a school magazine with a photographer who would also become famous in his own right, Richard Avedon. Similarly, Maya Angelou hails from Harlem, but later died at Jacobi Hospital in the northernmost borough in 2014.

Matching a deference to history with a love for abstraction, Gatson’s subway murals build upon his ongoing Icons series, which was previously exhibited in 2017 at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The artist’s murals collate hard-edge geometries with a palette featuring red, black, and green (the colors of Pan-Africanism) to raise awareness for the contributions of non-White figures in America.

Gatson, who was chosen through the MTA’s station artwork commissioning process, says that the organization supported and encouraged his vision. “And on a personal level, it is an honor to celebrate and pay homage to my heroes in such a public and permanent way,” he added.



*Beacons* (2018) at 167th Street Station, commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts & Design; Celia Cruz portrait derived from a photograph owned by Celia Cruz Entertainment LLC. (image courtesy MTA, © Rico Gatson)

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