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CURRENTS

Q&A  
A Subway Sculptor Creates a Stop on the Bee Train



CITY BEEKEEPING Christopher Russell and his bronze bee gates at the Sunset Park subway station in Brooklyn and close-ups of the bronze bees. Below, a detail of a drawing by Mr. Russell for his sculptured bee gate.

Christopher Russell, 52, a Manhattan sculptor, is one of 10 artists commissioned by the M.T.A. Arts for Transit and Urban Design program in its latest project to enhance New York subway stations. Almost all of the new works (seven are scheduled for unveiling today along the D line in Brooklyn) are laminated glass wind-screens that edge subway platforms above ground. One project, by the artist Andrea Dezső, consists of stainless steel railings that are part of a transfer bridge and underpass.

Mr. Russell was entrusted with designing bronze gates, 7 feet high and 6 feet wide, at the Ninth Avenue Station in the Sunset Park neighborhood of Brooklyn. The gates depict honeybees crawling on hives, and the posts of adjacent fences will have honeybees resting on 17 finials shaped like flower heads.

The gates are expected to be presented in the fall after the station, an Arts and Crafts-style copper-roofed structure built in 1916, has been fully renovated. Although the gates are operable, riders will not pass through them, but will simply admire them (or tremble in their presence).

**How do bees speak to subway riders?**

The station is like a kiosk, and it reminded me of beehives — of people coming in and out of it, and doing their jobs. I began to think about the great gates that Gaudí did. He came from a family of ironworkers, and there's a



Bees sculptured in bronze, just 'bustling around.'

fantastic dragon gate he did in Barcelona.

Metalwork and gates were definitely an aspect of the Arts and Crafts tradition, and that was very much on my mind. I also thought about Mackintosh and his buildings in Glasgow.

**Are you an expert in bees?**

I've worked in ceramics for 20 years, and primarily with birds, sea life and bees for the last five years. I became interested in the incredible complexity of hives, the detail of the work bees do and the exactness. I took it upon myself to recreate these hives in ceramic,

and that became a three- or four-year project.

**What was it like switching to bronze?**

I never worked in metal before, so I found this great foundry in Astoria, Queens, in the stables of the Steinway estate: the Modern Art Foundry. It was founded in the 1930s, and they did Louise Bourgeois's casting. I set about learning to work in bronze, which is learning to work in wax. I did the wax sculpture for the project, and the foundry did the casting and the finishing.

**What are the bees doing on your gates?**

Just bustling around. You don't see if they're collecting honey or tending to the larvae, or to the baby bees. It's just more general activity.

**How many are there exactly? Are they all different?**

There are 400 bees spread across the 4 doors. I made 15 different bees out of wax; they all had different kinds of attitudes and gestures. The foundry took each of those bees and made a rubber mold of it, and reproduced it 30 or 35 times, and that's how we ended up with 400. I decided on the placement of the bees and worked closely with one of the welders and finishers there, and each day, I'd go to the foundry, and I would lay out six bees.

**They look pretty real to me.**

I had to chunk the imagery up a bit. I couldn't have sharp

edges, or things that could be broken. No delicate little stingers. All the bees are covered with very fine hair. I've indicated it with a drawn mark, rather than sculpted. They look slightly furry.

**How big are they?**

The ones on the gates are about four inches long, and the ones on the finials are about seven inches long. An actual bee is about a half-inch.

**Aren't you worried people will be terrified when they see a lot of bees, even if they're bronze?**

I think people understand that bees are a valuable presence in this world, that they symbolize a kind of bucolic peacefulness and simplicity. Bees go about their business. They're actually very docile when they're swarming.

**Might you take up beekeeping now?**

I think I'm happy with my make-believe bees.

ELAINE LOUIE

Christopher Russell's bronze bee gates will be on view in the fall at the Ninth Avenue subway station at 39th Street in Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

ONLINE: MORE ANSWERS

To ask Christopher Russell more questions about his project, submit them by Friday afternoon:

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