

ART & EXHIBITS

San Francisco skyline stars in mosaic at newly opened SFO terminal

Sam Whiting July 17, 2019 Updated: July 23, 2019, 6:01 pm



Oakland artist Robert Minervini in front of “Hyper-Natural Bay Area” during a hard-hat tour of Harvey Milk Terminal 1 at SFO. Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

The skyline of San Francisco has been depicted in every medium, from the logo on Herb Caen’s column in The Chronicle to the hats at “Beach Blanket Babylon.” Now it’s been re-created as a 31-by-9-foot tile mosaic for all to see — locals and visitors alike.

On Tuesday, July 23, the public art piece “Hyper-Natural Bay Area” by Robert Minervini opened along with Harvey Milk Terminal 1 at San Francisco International Airport. The project took two years, cost \$370,000, and is composed of hundreds of thousands of tiles, each set by hand.

It would have been accomplishment enough to show the skyline, which spans from the Dogpatch past the Bay Bridge, downtown, North Beach and the Golden Gate Bridge. But Minervini went a

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step further by planting still-life objects in the foreground, including a bear, ancient pottery and the Goddess Minerva, the artist's signature image.



Still-life detail in Robert Minervini's "Hyper-Natural Bay Area" Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

The point of "Hyper-Natural Bay Area" is to give travelers a San Francisco view the moment they step off the plane, before hassling the hour it takes to get from the gate to an actual view of the city. Or to provide the only view passengers will get while making a connecting flight. Or to provide one last view of the city for San Franciscans heading out.

"I see it as an imaginary window at the airport, looking at the city center with a variety of still-life objects meant to playfully occupy the traveler's imagination," says the 37-year-old artist by phone from Castro Valley, where he's creating another mural along Highway 580. "It's a meditative space for getting lost in the scenery and the variety of objects."

The mosaic is one of five permanent pieces paid for by the San Francisco Arts Commission to honor the 50th anniversary of the city's "percent for art" program, which necessitates that either 1% or 2% of the total construction cost of any project be designated for public art.

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A multi-layered installation by Leonardo Drew at Harvey Milk Terminal 1. Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

Some \$49 million has been collected through this formula and 2,167 works acquired for the Civic Art Collection. There are more works from the collection on display at the airport than at any other location in the city — 162 works, most of them public sculptures.

By the time Harvey Milk Terminal 1 is completed in 2022, another 34 will have been added at a value of \$10.5 million, officials said.

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“Harvey Milk: Messenger of Hope,” a photography exhibit at Harvey Milk Terminal 1. Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

Most of this public art is past security checkpoints, which raises the question: How public is it since you need to be in possession of a paid airline ticket in order to see it? You will need to be flying Southwest or JetBlue to be exposed to Minervini’s mural at Boarding Area B.

If you are so lucky, come early or hope for a delayed flight to allow enough time to study the intricacies of “Hyper-Natural Bay Area.”

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Robert Minervini with “Hyper-Natural Bay Area” Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

To create the mosaic, Minervini made a 15-foot-wide painting of the skyline in his Oakland studio and photographed the detail. Then he boarded a flight of his own, 13 hours to Munich, where his fabricator is located. It took a week just to explain it to the fabricator, then six months for a crew of six German and Italian artisans to build it out of glass, ceramic tile and marble.

Halfway through, Minervini took another 13-hour flight to make sure it met his specifications. The completed mosaic was then broken up like the pieces of a puzzle for shipping. Two fabricators then flew from Munich to install it. The job took two weeks, and they never had to leave the airport.

“Only two tiles had to be replaced,” he says, “and that was because the shade of blue was too dark.”

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A work from “Robert Minervini: Future Collapse” at Rena Bransten Gallery

If you don't have reason to fly, you can see the original painting of “Hyper Natural Bay Area” on display at Rena Brantsen Gallery at the Minnesota Street Project through Aug. 17. The painting is part of “Future Collapse,” a solo exhibition depicting Minervini's unique still-life and landscape paintings inspired by California topography.

“I'm a 100% original artist. The best ever,” he says with a self-mocking laugh.

“Hyper-Natural Bay Area”: Boarding Area B, Harvey Milk Terminal 1, San Francisco International Airport.

“Robert Minervini: Future Collapse”: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Through Aug. 17. Rena Bransten Gallery, 1275 Minnesota St., S.F. 415-982-3292. renabranstengallery.com