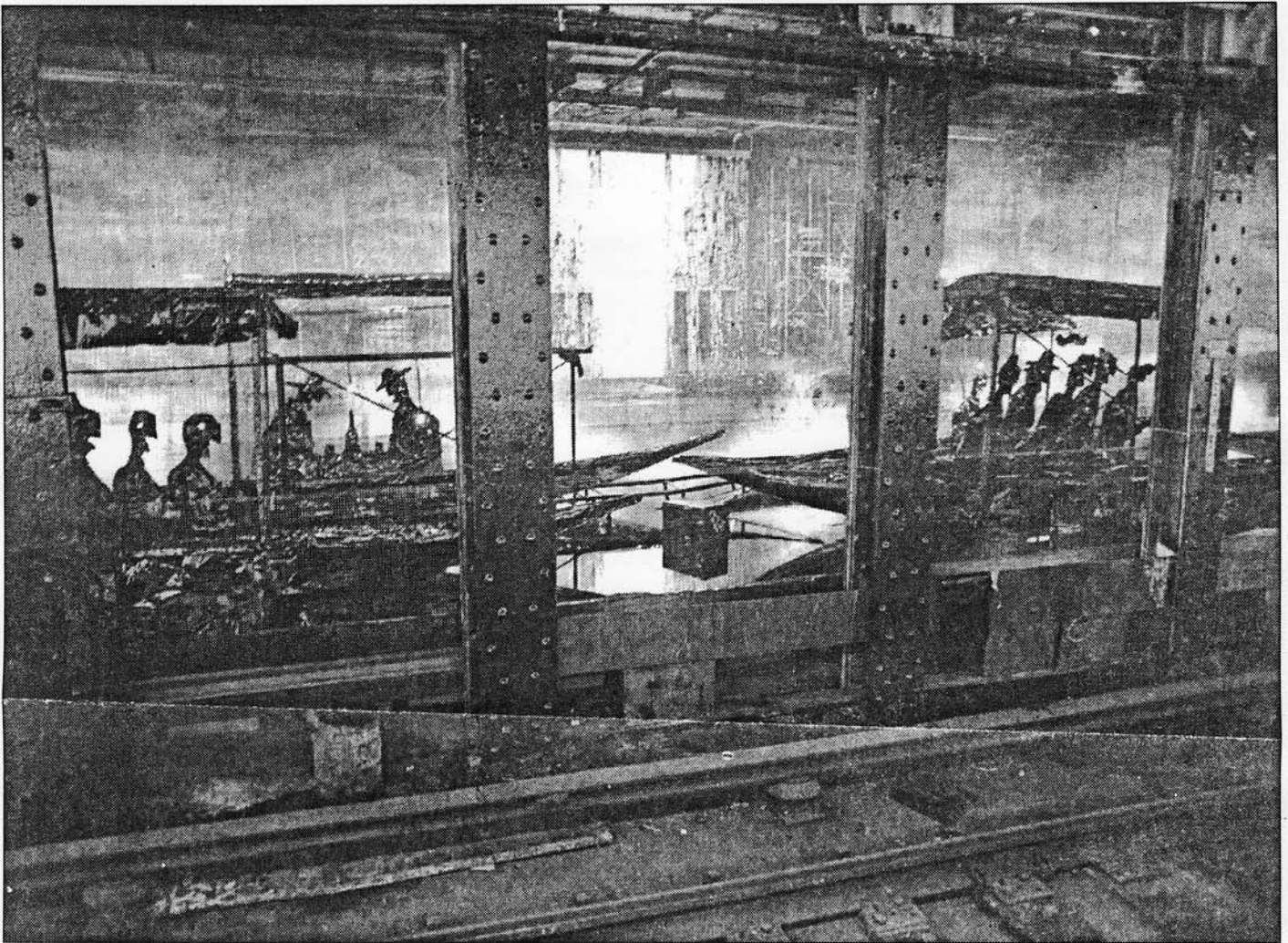


Kaplan, Fred. "Touch of Venice at Canal Street." *The Boston Globe*, Monday, December 9, 1996, p. A3.

'It's wonderful. I was just thinking, what a horrible station this is – and then to come upon this!'

MARIANNE EDWARDS, *New Yorker*

Touch of Venice at Canal Street



AP PHOTO

Artist Alexander Brodsky's Venetian gondolas have brought life to Manhattan's Canal Street Station.

Artwork at station fairly transports NYC subway riders

By Fred Kaplan
GLOBE STAFF

NEW YORK – Gondolas are floating under Chinatown. Go down to the subway – into the Canal Street Station, aptly enough – and walk along the platform that takes you from the No. 6 line to the N and the R trains. It may be the dreariest stretch of the entire subway system, striding a pair of disused train tracks, long under renovation, surrounded by thick pipes, torn metal rods, broken lights and garish graffiti: the very vision of every tourist's nightmare-stereotype of New York underground.

Then, suddenly, on the far side of the tracks, behind a thin sheet of gauze, as if in a dream, appear five wood-and-metal gondolas, coasting on a bed of water, sparkling with lights. The silhouettes of people on board – men in porkpie hats, women in gowns – show them in poses of laughing, drinking wine, imbibing the spirit of an imaginary Venice.

Marianne Edwards was one of hundreds of New Yorkers who stopped, stunned, to take in this sight. "It's wonderful," she sighed. "I was just thinking, what a horrible station this is – and then to come upon this!"

The Venetian gondolas of Canal Street represent the latest, and in some ways the most ambitious, undertaking in a vast series of underground art works brightening the city's subways. There are 65 such works around the city, with another 70 or so in progress, paid for by the Metropolitan Transit Authority's Arts for Transit program and, in some cases, a private non-profit group called the Public Art Fund.

The gondolas were created by Alexander Brodsky, a Russian artist and architect who splits his time between Moscow and Jersey City. "Surprise – that's the thing I wanted to bring with this," he said, gazing on his magical boats. "It's not an easy thing to do in New York City."

Brodsky was still at work the other

day, painting wavy, vertical lines on a large white canvas hung behind the gondolas and brightly lit from behind.

"The idea," said his art dealer, Ronald Feldman, who owns a SoHo gallery just a few blocks away, "is that there's some strange, wonderful world and that if you could get across the train tracks, you'd get to paradise."

Brodsky, thin, bearded and 41, was less voluble. "I like the space," he said, looking around the dank station. "I like this strange, scary atmosphere."

An assistant at the Feldman Gallery, Peggy Kaplan, said Brodsky came to her months ago with the idea of building some kind of work in a subway station. "I told him I knew of a subway that wasn't being used, so I brought him here," she recalled.

"He went nuts over the place, he loved it. I felt really bad because I realized I was encouraging him to do something crazy."

"And I told her, 'That's our job,'" Feldman chimed in. "We're supposed to encourage him to do something crazy."

Kaplan then found out about the MTA's subway-art program and entered Brodsky's design in a competition. Out of 350 applicants, it won.

"It's really a dream come true," Feldman said.

Brodsky has long specialized in creating art that offers a zone of relief from daily despair. In Moscow, in the early 1980s, he was a leader in the "paper architect" movement, drawing blueprints for projects at once grand and whimsical, amazingly detailed yet utterly unreal – a protest of sorts against the deadly bland architecture of the real-life Soviet Union.

One of these etchings, called "A Bridge Above the Precipice in the High Mountains," shows two ragged, barren cliffs, joined at the top by a cathedral. Another depicts a tiny man, a figure of hope, walking a tightrope stretched along an imposing mass of gigantic skyscrapers.

The gondolas will stay afloat for six weeks, according to Sandra Bloodworth, director of the Arts for Transit Program. After that, the repair of the train line might finally be finished, and the whoosh and clang of the N-Express train will awaken the Canal Street station from a dream of its own bridge or tightrope between Chinatown and Venice.