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CONEY GETS HANG OF IT

Gateway art project finally on display

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THE subway's "Gateway to Coney Island" now pays an artistic homage to the seaside amusement mecca — thanks to a Brooklyn artist's project nearly 20 years in the making.

Deborah Masters, 60, of Williamsburg, was tapped in 1992 to design art for the Ocean Parkway subway station.

She was drawn to the Frederick Law Olmsted-designed Art Deco viaduct outside and sculpted massive reliefs to hang on it.

They were finally unveiled last month after years in storage because of maintenance problems at the station.

"I just loved Coney Island," she said. "I used to go out in the afternoons to sit at the aquarium when the beluga whale was there, and she had a baby and they would sing. I'd go and hang out with the whales."

For months back in the early 1990s, Masters spent every day in Coney Island photographing



Deborah Masters poses beneath massive artwork she created to hang from Art Deco viaduct at Ocean Parkway gateway to Coney Island — after years of waiting for station to be rehabbed. Photo by Jeff Bachner

and sketching the characters she encountered on the beach, Boardwalk and amusement parks. There were kids building sand castles and bikini-clad beauties taking in rays, sideshow

performers eating glass and hammering nails into their noses, Polar Bear swimmers, rival gang members showing off.

"I just drew what I saw there," she said. "Coney Island's a differ-

ent space than anywhere else in New York City. It's vaudeville in a way. . . . People didn't mind me sitting and doing drawings of them and taking photographs of them."

She turned the sketches into massive, 1,650-square-foot sculpted reliefs, finishing the day of her deadline — only to find officials had discovered the viaduct needed major repairs and couldn't support the artwork.

So the reliefs sat in storage, moving between four different MTA facilities. Masters' contract said if the art wasn't displayed within eight years, she could display it somewhere else, but nowhere but the historic Gateway to Coney Island seemed appropriate.

Finally, the MTA launched the renovation project in 2007 and then started hanging the reliefs.

"There's a big difference from looking at something in a warehouse to seeing it at the site that was intended," said Lester Burg, project manager for the MTA Arts for Transit program.

"I just waited. I actually had totally given up hope, so when they called me, I was just amazed," Masters said.

"A lot of birds went to the bathroom on them and a lot of dust collected. . . . We colored them and cleaned all the dust off them."

The project was finally unveiled April 30. "It was just amazing. I was so happy," Masters said.