



**New York City Council
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations**

Oversight Hearing: An Update on the Percent for Art Program

November 6, 2023, 10:00AM – City Council Committee Room, City Hall

**Testimony Presented by New York City Department of Cultural Affairs Assistant Commissioner
Kendal Henry**

Good morning, Chair Ossé and members of the committee. I am Kendal Henry, Assistant Commissioner for Public Art at the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA), here to testify in regards to today's topic, An Update on the Percent for Art Program. I am joined today by a number of my colleagues from the agency, including the director of the Percent for Art program, Sergio Pardo Lopez.

Today's topic is one that is near and dear to my heart. I started as an intern in this program while attending art school, and commissioning artworks for schools through Percent was my earliest professional experience – and clearly very formative for me. So I appreciate the opportunity to testify. New York City's Percent for Art program has created an unparalleled collection of site-specific artwork that is deeply woven into the fabric of our city. It also gives artists a prime seat at the table in shaping our civic spaces and buildings. These artists work in all disciplines, come from all backgrounds, and hail from every corner of New York City and across the world. They work in sculpture, mosaics, painting, and other media, in bronze, stone, tile, glass, environmental sculpture, and more.

Percent for Art is part of DCLA's public art portfolio, which also includes our Public Artists in Residence and City Canvas programs. And while Percent pertains specifically to eligible City projects, we represent one component of the city's larger ecosystem of public art. Agencies like Parks and DOT have their own temporary art programs. Nonprofits like Public Art Fund, Creative Time, Times Square Alliance, Madison Square Park, the High Line, More Art, and others install temporary artwork in public spaces around the city. And the Metropolitan Transportation Authority operates the Art and Design program, which brings both temporary and permanent installations to the city's subway system.

Often, Percent for Art commissions exist in civic spaces that are somewhat less traveled by the general public. They're in schools, in courthouses, libraries, and waste treatment facilities. Artwork in these spaces has the power to connect deeply with their audiences. For instance, students at PS/IS 48 on Staten Island, have their time in the school shaped by artist Penelope Umbrico's *Cabinet 1526-2013*. This work features over 6,000 hand drawn images taken from natural science illustrations dating back centuries, depicting birds and reptiles to shells and stars. The piece extends from floor to ceiling, so as students grow taller, new aspects of the art would be accessible and visible to them. It's this sort of thoughtful installation, which consider deeply the audiences and spaces where an artwork will exist, we seek to create through Percent for Art.

New York City's Percent for Art program was signed into law in 1982 by Mayor Ed Koch. This wasn't the first such program. New Deal-era federal programs set aside funding for art in public buildings starting in the 1930's, and Philadelphia pioneered the model at the municipal level in the 1950s. But given the wealth of artistic talent concentrated here and the breadth of our public realm, our program has had a tremendous influence on public art both here in New York and around the world.

The first Percent commission here in New York was completed in 1985. Artist Jorge Luis Rodriguez's *Growth*, installed in the Harlem Art Park, is an abstract steel sculpture – painted bright red – that resembles a blooming flower, a bird taking flight, or any number of other things based on the viewer's angle and inclinations. It has become an icon in the East Harlem community. A temporary art installation shared space in the same park until this past weekend, and it's inspiring to see a younger generation of artists riffing on Jorge's piece and creating something in direct conversation with it. From the very start, NYC's Percent for Art was providing space for work that grew deep roots in the communities where it's located. We've completed over 360 projects since then, and have more than 100 in progress. Whether they're monumental new additions that shape the experience of a vast public space, or a smaller commission installed over the drinking fountain of a school - each one contributes to our city in some unique and powerful way.

I'll now provide a brief overview of how the Percent process works. First, an eligible, City-funded capital project must be initiated. Our agency partners notify us of the project in its earliest stages – the earlier, the better, so that the art can be truly integrated into the design process. In accordance with local law, we notify the community of the intent to commission an artwork – typically through a presentation to the local community board, or another local meeting. We convene a panel consisting of representatives from DCLA, the design and sponsor agencies, local elected officials, community representatives, and arts professionals. These professionals can include artists who have previously created public artworks; arts administrators who work in the affected community; architects, and others. A typical commission consists of two panels: the first panel reviews dozens of potential artists based on their past work and submissions to the Percent for Art artist registry, and narrows the field to 4-6 finalists. The finalists are then invited to create proposals for the project. At this point, the artists are fully briefed on the details of the project, and have the opportunity to learn more from stakeholders about what it means to their community. These proposals are reviewed at a second panel, where a finalist is chosen. Should they accept the commission, we then work closely with the artist over the course of months on design development. This includes moving through additional community board presentations, submissions to the Public Design Commission, and ultimately the fabrication and installation of their work.

Additional non-voting panel members can be brought into the process, depending on the specifics of a given commission. For the Percent project honoring Roberto Clemente in the South Bronx, for instance, members of the Clemente family were invited to participate in the panel process. They stressed that they wanted Clemente's humanitarian work to be foregrounded in the artwork, and not just his athletic achievements, and this was integrated into the artist's brief. *Para Roberto*, by artist Melissa Calderon, which is installed in Roberto Clemente Plaza at 3rd Avenue and 149th Street in the Bronx, achieves this balance while reimagining what a monument can look like. This sort of in depth community involvement in the commissioning process is a hallmark of Percent, and yields an art collection that is profoundly reflective of the people and places of New York City.

We rely on both agency and community partners to make each commission a success. Our colleagues at the Parks Department, Department of Transportation, and Department of Design and Construction are all essential to the creation of artworks their agencies are involved in. The Public Design Commission, which has oversight over thousands of artworks and markers in the City's collection, are also important partners who help ensure artworks will stand the test of time. Our work across agencies, with the Percent panels, and with local community representatives fosters an open, democratic dynamic that is unique to our Percent for Art program. The commissioning process we have created here is used as a model across the country. Many artists welcome the opportunity to bring this productive dialogue into their creative process. This process also generates a sense of ownership and buy-in from the local community where a project will reside. We always have to be mindful to balance an artists' vision with local interests, as art designed by committee rarely works. But when a community and artist truly connect, they can create amazing things.

None of this is to say that the Percent process is always without its bumps. Ask 10 New Yorkers what they think of something and you'll get 30 opinions. But process helps channel and incorporate this input into something more productive, generative, and collaborative. Residents are passionate about their neighborhoods and public spaces, and this is a very good thing. Our process harnesses this passion and uses it to help shape public artwork into something that communities feel invested in.

Percent for Art has often provided an opportunity for early career artists to have their first major commissions. In fact, it is the case for over 85% of the artists we work with. We work closely with artists on designs and to navigate concerns they might not encounter in their studio practice, or when presenting work in galleries or museums. Issues like, can someone climb their artwork, for example? How will materials weather over time? Avoiding pointy angles – and so on. Creating public art is a whole new practice and discipline for many artists, and we are here to help them navigate the process.

More recently, Percent for Art has been central to efforts to diversify the city's overall collection. The first project announced under this initiative is a monument honoring Shirley Chisholm, planned for Prospect Park. Designed by artist team Amanda Williams and Olalekan Jeyifous, the Chisholm monument recently received conceptual approval from the Public Design Commission, and we're now working with the artists to further refine their design. Several other projects in this initiative were announced just before the pandemic, which ground them to a halt before planning really got started. We are now ready and excited to get more of these back underway.

Even before this new focus, we were commissioning artists from diverse backgrounds to create monumental artworks in our city. For instance, artist Hank Willis Thomas's *Unity* on Tillary Street in Downtown Brooklyn, an enormous arm rising from the median and pointing into the sky in a gesture that's open for interpretation. At 70 Mulberry Street in Manhattan's Chinatown – a community hub which suffered a devastating fire in January 2020 and is being rebuilt by the City, we recently commissioned artist Jennifer Wen Ma to work with the building's designers to create an artwork that reflects the facility's central role for its surrounding community. Whether we call them monuments or not, these large-scale pieces are shaping our public spaces, and connecting with deep currents of history, identity, and values which run through our communities.

In addition to community buy in, another measure of success for Percent for Art are the awards that our projects and the artists who create them receive. In the last five years Percent for Art has received 11

Awards for Excellence in Design – over one fifth of all such awards given. And one award was a special recognition to the Percent for Art program itself. Our artists have gone on to be inducted into the National Academy of Design. They've received MacArthur Awards. Jeffrey Gibson – who has received two Percent for Art commissions, including one at PS 264, Brooklyn - will represent the U.S. at the 2024 Venice Biennale, the first Indigenous artist to have a solo exhibition in the U.S pavilion there. And they've continued to create work in the public realm across New York and beyond. Hank Willis Thomas just created the new monument honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King in Boston. Jean Shin created a mural from repurposed buttons in the new Perelman Performing Arts Center in Lower Manhattan. As I mentioned earlier, we're proud that Percent for Art provides so many artists a prominent entry point into creating permanent, public commissions.

For the program's 40th anniversary, which we've been celebrating throughout the year, we've had a number of opportunities to highlight Percent projects. Starting in May, the steps of City Hall were wrapped in images from Percent commissions around the five boroughs. Late last month, we led fully booked tours and engagements of Percent projects as part of Open House New York Weekend. And we've got more in store in the weeks and months ahead.

We're proud of the hundreds of public artworks created over the life of the Percent for Art program. From Ellen Harvey's *Mathematical Star* in the heart of Bed Stuy; to Chakaia Booker's *Sugar in My Bowl II* at Weeksville Heritage Center; to the *The Totally Kid Carousel* in Harlem's Riverbank State Park, which kids had an active role in designing; to Nobuho Nagasawa's *Luminescence* in Long Island City. The list goes on, but these artworks are so important to the sense of place in each of these locations, and do so much to bring the brilliance of our city's artists into the lives of New Yorkers every day. In 2017, then-Council Member Laurie Cumbo co-sponsored legislation that updated the Percent for Art funding formula for the first time since the program was created. Increasing the funding allotted to artworks and adjusting for realities of inflation and the costs of fabrication has allowed us to create more durable, high quality works. Due, in part, to this update, we are very excited about the dozens of projects in our pipeline. Artist Oasa Duverney is creating a series of reflective portraits of influential authors from the African diaspora for the Brooklyn Public Library Eastern Parkway branch. Artist David Rios is creating a vibrant mural inspired by a Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story at the Hunts Point Library. Christopher Myers is creating two site-specific, stained glass installations for the renovated Brownsville Library in Brooklyn. Tatiana Arocha's *The Hawk and the Heron* will grace a new annex to the Snug Harbor Music Hall on Staten Island. And Katrín Sigurdardóttir's commission for the upcoming Rego Park Library in Queens consists of a large mural that will be integrated within the library and an artist book that will be included in the library's collection.

The more involved our partners are – including the City Council – the more successful this program can be. We need you to recommend artists from your communities to submit to our artist registry. We need you to engage in panels when projects are commissioned in your districts. Together, we can make sure that the next 40 years of this program continues to see it bringing artwork to our city that is both bold and community driven – just like the city itself.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.

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International Intergroup Relations Committee on Immigration

NYC Cultural
Affairs



Penelope Umbrico, *Cabinet 1526-2013*
PS IS 71, Staten Island

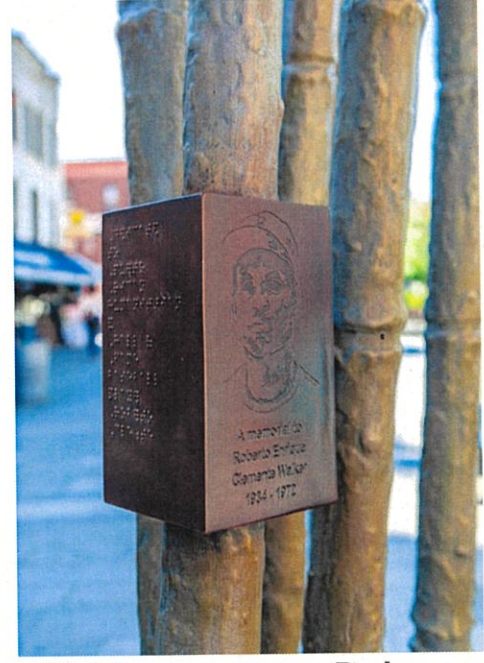


Jorge Luis Rodríguez, *Grown*
Harlem Art Park, Manhattan

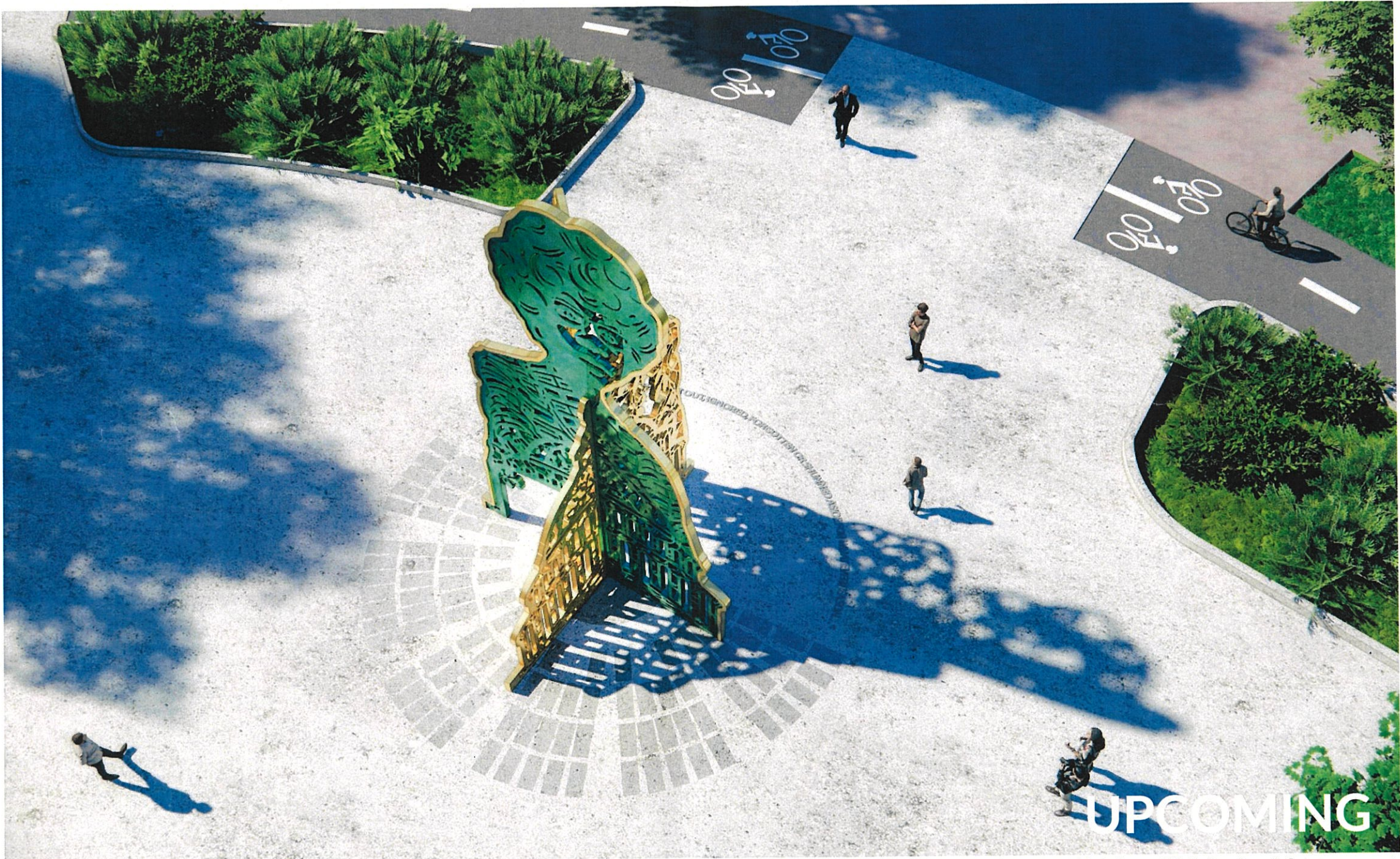


Kevin Quiles Bonilla and Zaq Landsberg, *For centuries, and still...*

Harlem Art Park, Manhattan



Melissa Calderon • Para Roberto
Roberto Clemente Plaza, Bronx, NY



Amanda Williams & Olalekan Jeyifous, *Shirley Chisholm Monument*
Prospect Park south-east entrance, Brooklyn



COMING

Amanda Williams & Olalekan Jeyifous, *Shirley Chisholm Monument*
Prospect Park south-east entrance, Brooklyn



Hank Willis Thomas • Unity
Tillary Street ph2, Brooklyn, NY



Jeffrey Gibson, *Nephelococcygia*
PS 264, Brooklyn, NY



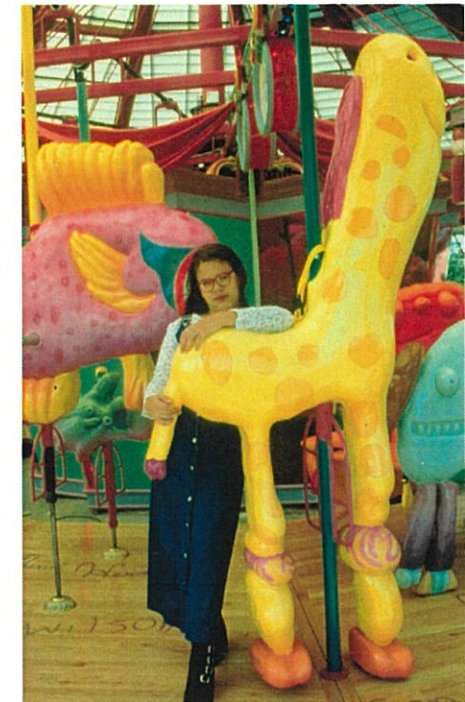
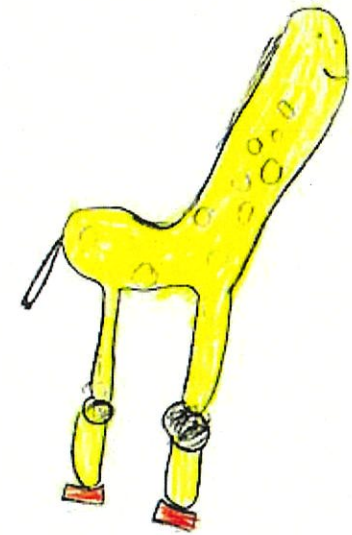
Percent for Art 40th Anniversary Exhibition
City Hall , NY



Ellen Harvey, *Mathematical Star*
Marcy Plaza, Brooklyn



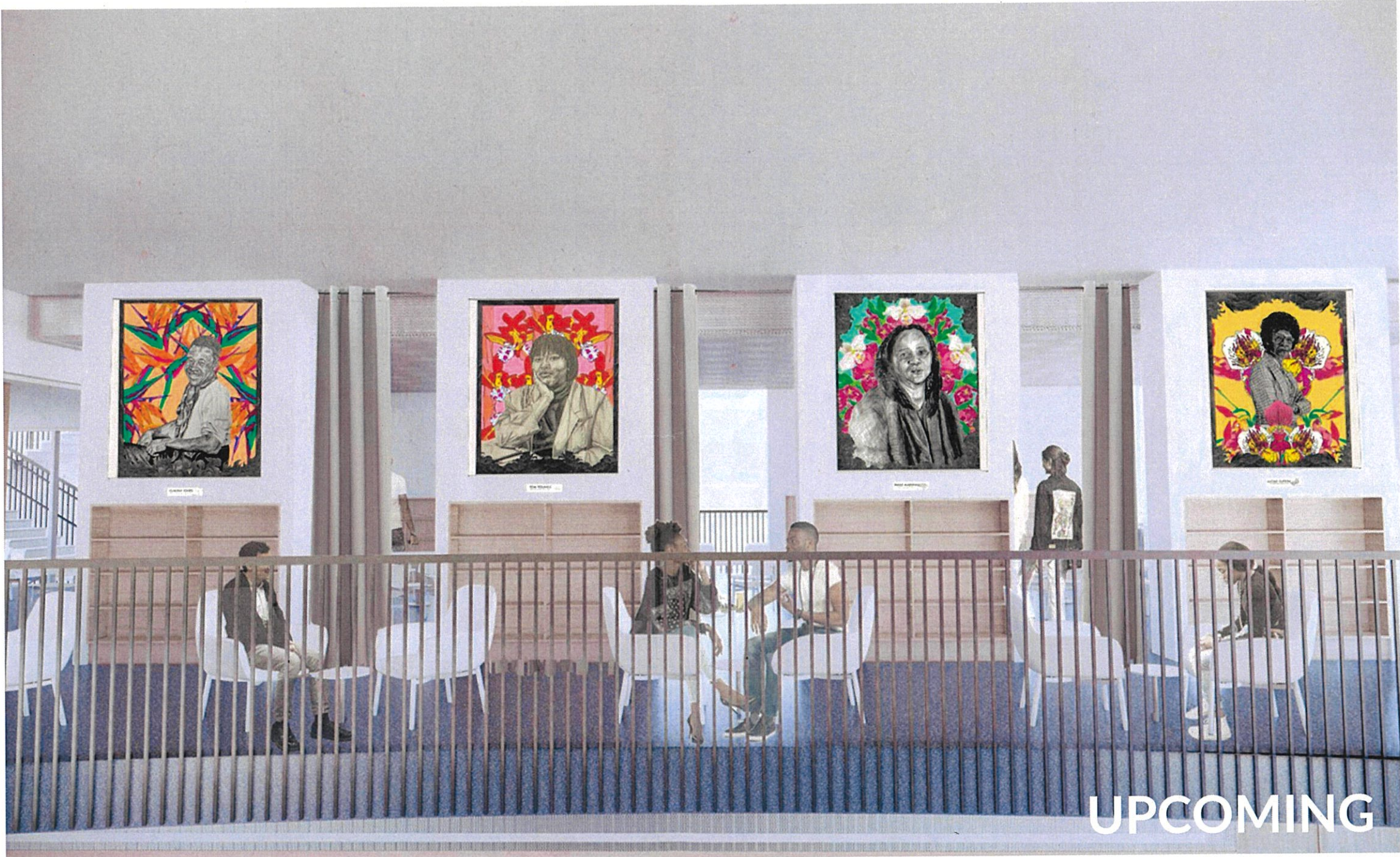
Chakaia Booker, *Sugar in My Bowl II*
Weeksville Heritage Center, Brooklyn



Milo Mottola, *The Totally Kid Carousel*
Riverbank State Park, Manhattan



Nobuho Nagasawa, *Luminescence*
Hunters Point South Waterfront Park I, Queen



UPCOMING

Oasa DuVerney, *What Do I See To Be Except Myself*
Eastern Parkway Library, Brooklyn



UPCOMING

David Rios, *We just wanted to have a rowboat in the room...*,
Hunts Point Library, Bronx

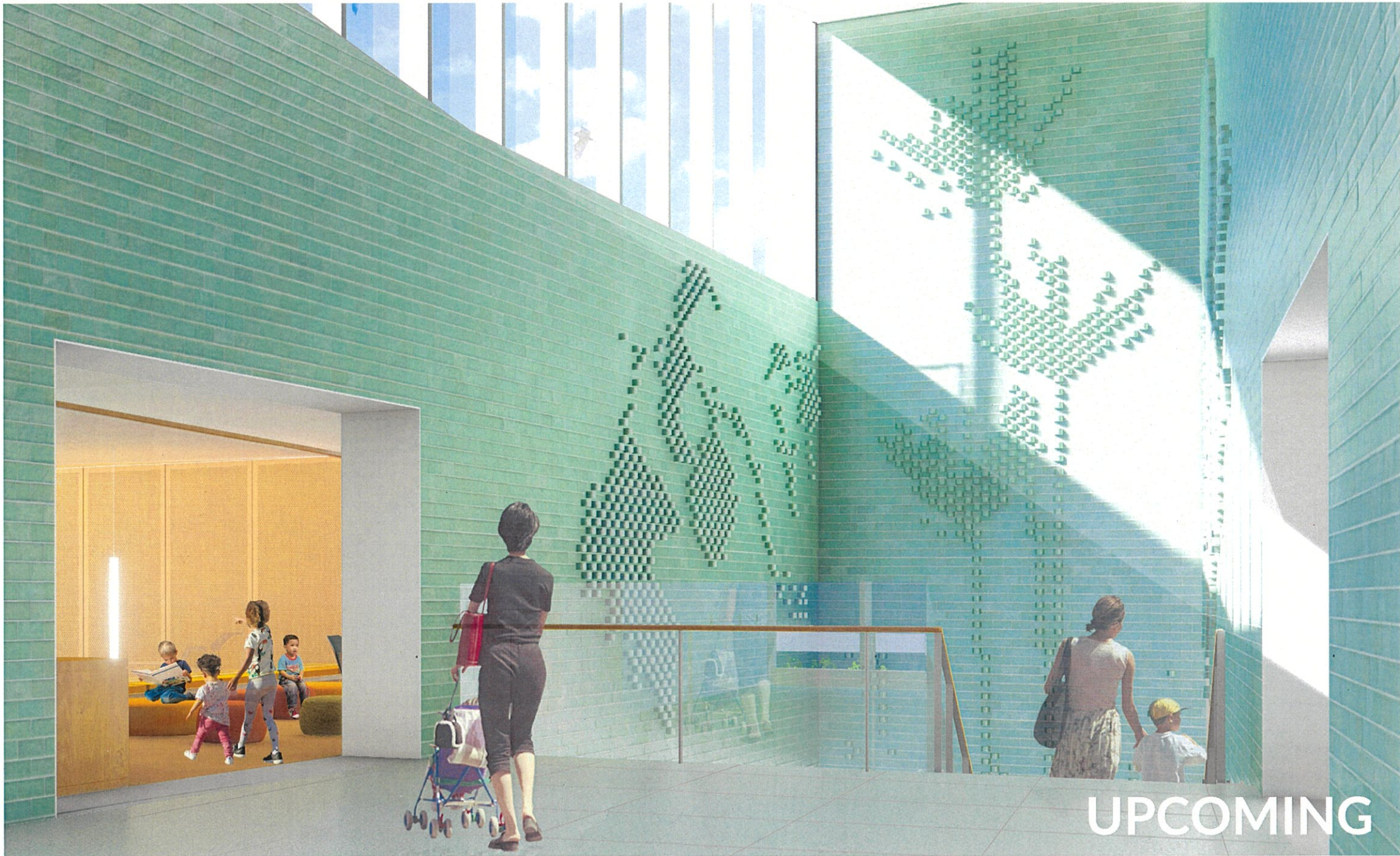


Christopher Myers, *Resonances*,
Bronxville Library, Brooklyn



UPCOMING

Tatiana Arocha, *The Hawk and the Heron*
Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Music Hall, Staten Island



UPCOMING

Katrín Sigurdardóttir, *The Fore*
Rego Park Library, Queen

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I represent: Move the Money NYC

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Name: EMILY WARD DCLA

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Name: Kendal Henry

Address: 31 Chambers Street

I represent: NYC Dept of Cultural Affairs

Address: "

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Name: Lance Polivy

Address: 31 Chambers St

I represent: NYC DCLA

Address: "

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in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Sergio Pardo Lopez

Address: 31 Chambers St

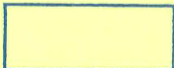
I represent: NYC DCLA

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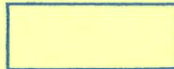
I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition T-2023 4048
Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: TOM GOBAN
Address: 5th ST BROOKLYN NY 11215
I represent: MOVE THE MONEY - NYC
Address: MTMNYC.ORG

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 in favor in opposition T2023-4158
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I represent: Move the Money
Address: _____

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 in favor in opposition T. 2023 4158
Date: _____

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Name: Roy Pingel
Address: Lombet St
I represent: Move The Money - NYC
Address: _____