

Time Out

New York

December 12-26, 2002

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TECHNOLOGY

Deck the Great Hall

How did that janitor get on the ceiling? All about the Grand Central Holiday Light Show. **By Angela Gunn**

In more pastoral parts of the world, winter finds small children flopping onto the frozen tundra to make snow angels and watch the clouds roll past. Meanwhile, here in the city, kids are sprawling on the floor at Grand Central Terminal to gaze at the season's Holiday Light Show, in which cartoonish creatures climb the walls and flocks of doves fly through an opening in the ceiling of the main concourse. Who needs nature—or hallucinogens—when you've got technology?

This year's light show, the fourth at Grand Central, is the first to eschew the usual laser display in favor of computer-generated imagery. The six pieces in the show, which is curated by the public-art mavens at Creative Time (creativetime.org), include photorealistic scenes of winter weather and fun (Builders' Association's *Snowday*), animated stories in kid-friendly primary colors and shapes (Mumbleboy's *Mumble Rumble*, C004's *Magic Snow*), non-representational club-kid fantasia (Leo Villareal's *Globeball*), and two trompe l'oeil crowd-pleasers: one segment shows computer-rendered janitors sweeping the iconic blue-and-gold expanse clean of cosmic debris (KDLAB's *Strazaster*), while the other seems to pierce the vault with a hole

allowing a flock of doves to fly out (Melanie Crean and Jordan Parrass's *Oculus*).

According to Paul Kastner, vice president and director of marketing and leasing for Jones Lang LaSalle (the MTA contractor that manages such projects), this year's show started to jell only late last summer, when Haagen-Dazs signed on to sponsor the production and retained Creative Time to evaluate the 40 artists who submitted project proposals. Not only a selection of computer-graphics mavens but video artists and even theater groups made the final cut.

The artists couldn't work in the terminal itself as they developed their projects, even though all pieces have to take into account the height and curvature of the vaulted ceiling, its unusual colors and especially the massive Paul Hellen zodiac painted thereon. (If you watch closely, you'll notice that each project takes the preexisting art into account in some fashion.)

Early testing was done at the huge Long Island City workspace of Scharif Weisberg, the firm that coordinated the brand-new projection technology at the heart of the project. Says Peter Scharif, "This kind of light show wasn't possible a year ago. We no longer



ON THE WINGS OF A DOVE A seagull bird makes for the open sky in *Oculus*, which looks less like a video projection than a painting.

have to project these 4-by-3 [proportioned], rectangular images; you can keep images upright and in their proper ratios even in a curved space like this, correcting for keystoning [the distortion a projection exhibits when a light source is at an angle from the surface onto which the light is projected] and so forth as it moves."

In mid-November the artists—with DJs in tow, as each display has its own soundtrack—were able to fine-tune their projects in the main concourse itself. The gear needed to do the job—just two projectors, both run by one Mac and one PC—fits into a cubicle-size area on the northeast balcony that's almost entirely unnoticeable from ground level.

Of course, most of the people buzzing through Grand Central are keeping one eye on their schedules and the other on their wallets; looking up and around, even in

New York's greatest indoor public space, isn't an agenda item. Creative Time's Sarah Bacon credits the soundtracks with prompting visitors to slow down and take notice. Of course, the younger set generally spots the display first and appreciates it most. According to Kastner, the presence of children compelled Grand Central to unveil the show slightly ahead of schedule. "On [the day of the show's unveiling] we had a school group in here, totally unrelated to the show. We weren't going to throw the switch until 11 a.m. but when I saw all these kids, I told the projectionist to show the images, even though we kept the soundtrack off. The squeals from the kids were unbelievable. The kids felt so attuned to it—it's wonderful, to put something like this in public. A lot of times kids will lie down and watch. I think that's adorable." ■