



The Art of Public Transportation

By Shana Nys Dambrot for PBS SoCal | June 30, 2026



Ken Gonzales-Day, Detail of *Urban Excavation: Ancestors, Avatars, Bodhisattvas, Buddhas, Casts, Copies, Deities, Figures, Funerary Objects, Gods, Guardians, Mermaids, Metaphors, Mothers, Possessions, Sages, Spirits, Symbols, and Other Objects*, 2026: Installation view at Wilshire/Fairfax Station, LA Metro. Courtesy of Metro Art (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority) | Paul Turang

Most art is exhibited in stately, contemplative spaces which one chooses and often pays to visit—not in bustling, cavernous public spaces where everyone is either rushing or waiting, and which are rarely considered as destinations in their own right. But as a recent string of public art successes from Metro Art has demonstrated, commuters of all kinds deeply appreciate when their cultural experience is as prioritized as their transport.

The cohort of large-scale, permanent contemporary works across the downtown connector stations, along the K Line, and thanks in part to the new LACMA's gravitational pull, the D Line—plus the D's forthcoming further west side stations—elevate the transportation infrastructure into something that feels less like an afterthought, activating its transitional spaces and signaling not only that the city takes public transit seriously, but public art as well. And my own informal poll of transit cops revealed that they are enjoying it, too, and several of the more colorful works have emerged as early favorites among the force.

The city is a palimpsest of decades of shifting cultural dynamics, and for many of these artists the specific social, cultural, and geographical history of the neighborhood inspired their creative choices. For others their projects have as much if not more to do with the quirks of the architecture and its intended functions as a space contoured by

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constant motion. Yet public art also demands material permanence, and shifting from sometimes delicate studio materials to industrial mediums like ceramic, glass mosaic, or alchemized metal was a choose your own adventure that played out differently for each of them.

For artist and scholar Ken Gonzales-Day (Wilshire / Fairfax) the question was both more whimsical and urgently literal. "The palette was drawn from the colors reflected in a single bubble from the surface of the Tar Pits. Blue, black, white, and rainbow colored highlights," Gonzales-Day says of his monumental photo-based murals. "I began by playfully asking myself, 'What if LACMA sank into the Tar Pits and these works were discovered in some future time, like so many other objects excavated from the tar pits over the years?'"

In *Urban Excavation: Ancestors, Avatars, Bodhisattvas, Buddhas, Casts, Copies, Deities, Figures, Funerary Objects, Gods, Guardians, Mermaids, Metaphors, Mothers, Possessions, Sages, Spirits, Symbols, and Other Objects*, Gonzales-Day reviewed over 4,000 sculptural items, before narrowing the selection down to the mere 70 photographed and included in the work. Spanning African art, the ancient Americas, Egyptian antiquities, and East Asian artifacts, the artist arranged them into the meteor-like forms hovering in massive, high-contrast glass tile murals that line the concourse walls, reflecting the station as a literal and metaphorical archeological site.