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# Jane Dickson: A History in the Making

Jane Dickson talks with Shattered's Chris "Daze" Ellis in her studio, remarkably close to her original Times Square Studio of 20 years earlier, to discuss her latest project: a sprawling mosaic mural commissioned by the MTA for the Times Square train station.

There is a moment in time when day turns into night, when the soft hues of natural light begin to fade and are replaced by the artificiality of neon lights upon the street. It is at this moment when the glare of television sets and 100-watt light bulbs begin to illuminate the interiors of urban settings. It is at this threshold – from dusk until dawn – that Jane Dickson's paintings come to life.

They bring us back to an earlier period in New York's history, pre-Giuliani, when Times Square was still an area very much on the edge. Dickson painted this subject as a resident who lived in this area – not generally known for its domestic qualities.

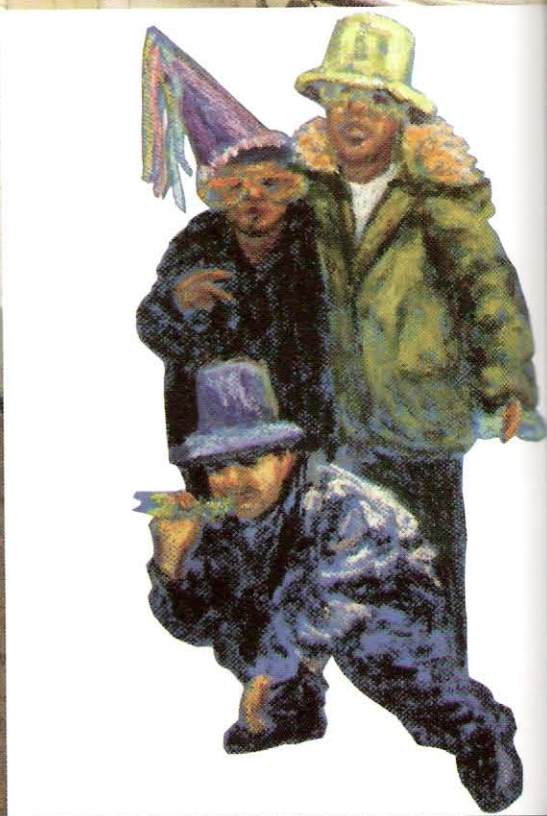
Her work is often about the play of artificial light on figures, in rooms, and on the streets. It is this light that fills the figures in her paintings with hope in a world they never made.

In the early '90s, Dickson, her husband (filmmaker Charlie Ahearn) and their family moved out of Times Square and away from the landscape of transient hotels and peep shows to an area more conducive to residential living. Not long after leaving Manhattan is when the Highway paintings began to appear. These works take us on a journey across the country, through tunnels and across highways and bridges. Along the way, motels, oncoming traffic and strip malls race by. The colors are no longer fluorescent or neon, but muted blues and soft yellows. Small passenger cars zoom past tractor-trailer trucks in the fast lane as Dickson's paintings put us in the driver's seat; the whole scene unfolds before us in the panoramic view of the windshield.

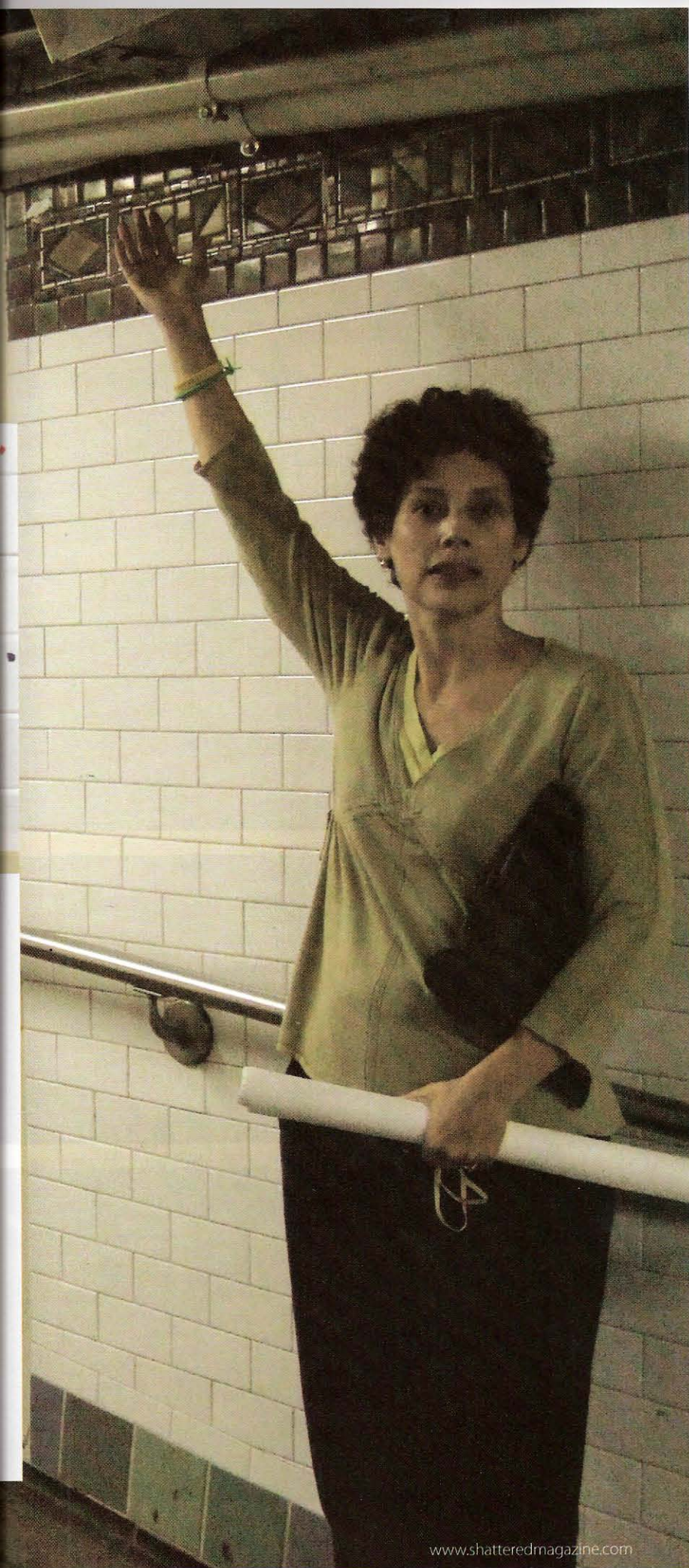
Her paintings seem to function as signs that bring us closer, and sometimes define the action in the work.

Titles such as *Peepland*, *Gem Liquors*, *God Truck* or *Taco Fiesta* define the context. It is with this in mind that her next series of paintings of arcades and amusement parks would bring us back into the world of the night. In this next series, which was shown in 2005 at Marlborough Gallery in New York, under the title, *Everyone's a Winner*, Dickson focused on the games of chance and food vendors that populate such legendary street fairs as the Feast of San Gennaro in New York's Little Italy. In these paintings, families wander through the festive atmosphere of fried foods, stuffed animal trophies and arcade games, alongside young couples enjoying the promise of a first date. These paintings resonate with the sounds of honking horns, loud voices and music as the occupants enjoy the atmosphere.

It is with these images in mind that I sat down with Dickson in her studio to discuss these works and that of her latest project: A Sprawling Mosaic Mural commissioned by the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) for the Times Square subway station. This incredible project depicts revelers in various states of abandon during the famed Times Square New Year's Eve celebrations. Caught in mid-motion, the revelers parade down the expanse of a long hallway in the underground station caught in motion. Some of the partiers seem to be summoning others to come and join the fun; others appear to be trying to catch up with the rest. All of the figures depicted are in a constant state of motion enjoying the underground celebration that Dickson has provided them. Judging from the studies for this ambitious work that I saw in her studio, Dickson's painting style is translated flawlessly into the medium of mosaic.







**As I sat down with Jane Dickson, she elaborated on this project, other series, as well as her beginnings 20 years earlier...**

*CDE: The first time I saw your work was in 1980 when you created the city maze installation at Fashion Moda gallery in the Bronx and invited Crash and Noc to paint it. What was the idea behind that work?*

**JD:** I'd like to step back a little bit first. I came to New York in 1978 and got a job doing animation with Susan Pitt and I knew that I wanted to be a painter but I felt like I hadn't really figured it out yet. I was in the art world but I was still trying to find my way. I met my husband Charlie and started going to these art events downtown. That was the late 70s, painting was dead; I was told you had to do video and installation. Stephen Eins had a concept to do a space that would permit all kinds of interesting social and political and aesthetic interchange so he decided to do this space in the Bronx. He had ideas of moving out of Soho and said, "I have this space, do you want to do something?" From the first time I visited Fashion Moda all these kids in that neighborhood who were really hungry for everything struck me. I wanted to do a project for kids even though at the time I wasn't really a teacher. I wanted to make art that these kids in the neighborhood could be excited about. Growing up my father was English; my grandparents lived just outside of London. They took me as a child to Hampton Court Palace where there is a famous hedge, so I'd been fascinated by mazes as a little kid but I was also new to New York City and saw the maze as a metaphor for my experience. I was a young woman in New York trying to figure out how to navigate through the labyrinth of the city.

*CDE: Did the idea of doing this project in the south Bronx play a certain role in it? Did it give you a sense of freedom?*

**JD:** Well I felt that all the Colab projects that I did felt free. There was a moment



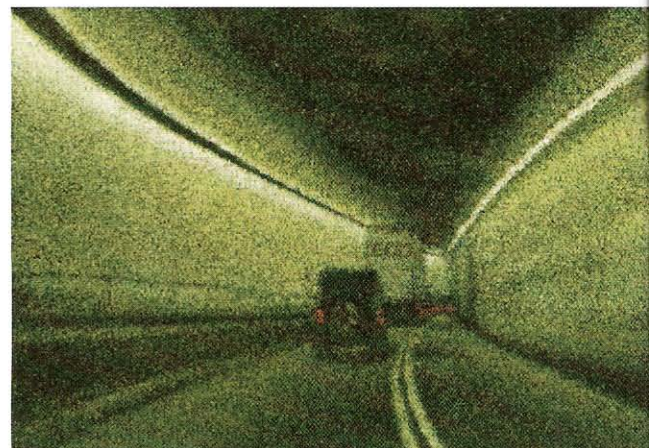
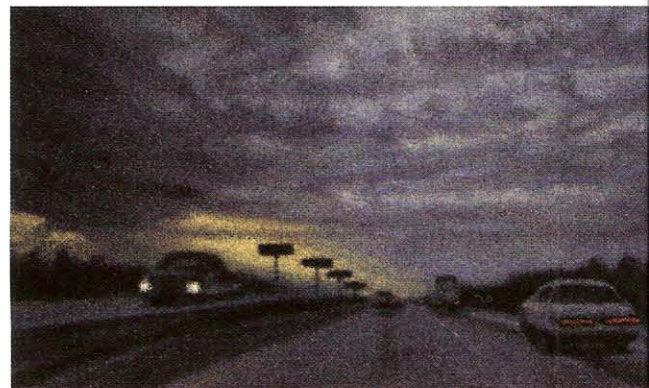


**Times Square**

**M** Metropolitan Transportation Authority  
Arts for Transit

Local color: The midnight mood of Times Square, as captured by artist Jane Dickson. See the real thing for just the price of a token. In New York, the subway takes you everywhere.

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when I felt that no one was paying attention anyway so you could be as bad as you wanted to be. The idea that a senator would ever notice what we did and care was unimaginable. I felt that all of these were improv situations where we didn't feel very pressured. On the other hand, I wanted to make a piece that did relate to the south Bronx.

**CDE:** *Many of your paintings are done on unconventional surfaces like carpet, sandpaper or Astroturf, which gives the work a physical quality. It's not just flat anymore but rather like the way you see a wall, which has imperfections, cracks and crevices. What role does the surface of the painting have for you?*

**JD:** I guess I'd like to go back to the City Maze piece for a minute. During the construction of that piece I was also trying to figure out how to paint and I had gotten some materials donated to me through an organization called Materials for the Arts. They gave me these rolls of textured vinyl wallpaper and I went home and started painting on this stuff. This material was really rough so it automatically fractured the stroke and it was dark. So I felt that I

was suddenly able to create these dark urban environments. For me it's a kind of alchemy where I could have an idea for a long time but until I touch the right things for that idea I can't execute it. So that rough texture has a ground to it that enables me to make glimmerings of brighter things coming out of the darkness. It was a great place to start. The other thing is that I've never been interested in painting on white, which is the basis of impressionism. To me it just doesn't give me anything. Give me something to start with – be it carpet, cardboard – and that automatically opens up a whole world of references and then I can key into that. White canvas I don't know. To me the references in that are mostly art historical.

**CDE:** *Yes, you're following in this certain line of tradition where even if your work isn't traditional, the medium still is.*

**JD:** You look at sculpture throughout the whole twentieth century; it went from marble, bronze and clay, to everything you could think of. Painting on the other hand has stuck with traditional materials. Particularly as a figurative artist I think it's important to reactivate figuration every way we can think of to revitalize it. I used

sandpaper on the stripper paintings. They're oil stick, which is really juicy and like lipstick, on sandpaper. So it's seductive and repellant, it's creamy and abrasive. It's come hither yet don't touch. The highways are on astro turf. Astroturf is fake nature. So in my highway paintings instead of painting the green blur, I use Astroturf.

**CDE:** *When I look at a lot of your paintings I see less of an influence of photography and more of an influence of film.*

**JD:** I think that there's an influence of film noir. I'm not really a film buff but I'm married to a filmmaker. My work has always been cinematic and that wasn't a conscious choice. I feel as if a lot of my work is about suspended motion. You feel like it's a movie still but there actually isn't much motion. A lot of it feels like freeze frame. And in the new mosaic project a lot of the figures will be in motion.

**CDE:** *It's a little like film in that you're trying to capture a certain mood.*

**JD:** It's true that in a way I'm sort of my own location scout.

**CDE:** *Even this Times Square project is kind of like casting.*

**JD:** It's true! Which is really fun to bring the two together. The other thing I think of in terms of the Times Square project is that it's three-quarters of a city block and in it, the viewers or commuters never stand still. Everyone that goes through that space is in a hurry in both directions. If you try to stop you'll get trampled. So I needed to make something for people to see in passing. They see little bits of it every time. I'm hoping that by having the figures themselves also in motion, it will almost function as an animation.

**CDE:** *How did you get involved in the Times Square project?*

**JD:** I had been involved in various public art groups and I knew the different people that worked at Arts for Transit over the years. I had also been a semi-finalist for a Lincoln Center project, which I didn't get; I was also a semi-finalist for 86th Street and Lexington Avenue, which I didn't get. This was the third time I was a semi-finalist. I have lived and worked in Times Square for 12 years, and have had a studio here for the past six years, so most of my adult life has been based in Times Square. It seemed like a perfect fit.