

HESSE FLATOW

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The New York Times

A Kinetic Cloud of Humanity for Moynihan Train Hall

Joshua Frankel, an artist whose grandfather worked at the James Farley Post Office, has deep roots at the site of his new video project for Art at Amtrak.



Joshua Frankel at Moynihan Train Hall where his animation "Within the crowd there is a quality," will be projected on 4 LED screens through Nov. 14.
Credit...George Etheredge for The New York Times

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By Laura van Straaten

Sept. 24, 2023

A bouncy strut, a dart-and-weave, a dawdle with a dog. A stroller, a grocery cart, a wheelchair. A burqa, a beanie, a bowler.

The diversity of those animated images in a new, silent four-channel video playing now on the huge, elevated screens at Moynihan Train Hall in Manhattan mirrors the mix of commuters below.

The video is a site-specific commission by the artist, animator and director Joshua Frankel that will run in 30-second loops every 15 minutes, across a 160-foot-wide LED display as part of the Art at Amtrak program, which in New York has recently diversified from murals into video art. (Frankel's work is surrounded by permanent stationary installations by Kehinde Wiley, Stan Douglas and Elmgreen & Dragset, introduced in 2020 in a separate program.)

Both Frankel's commission, called "Within the crowd there is a quality," and his exhibition of the same name, opening Nov. 1 at Hesse Flatow, a gallery several blocks away, are "deeply, personally meaningful for me," Frankel said. His grandfather worked for two decades for the U.S. Postal Service in the James A. Farley Building that now houses the train hall. Frankel, 43, grew up nearby, at 43rd Street and 10th Avenue in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen.

During an interview in the Amtrak offices above the busy train hall, Frankel said his interest in crowds developed during the social isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I was thinking about my hunger to be in crowds," he said, adding that he had previously worked on theatrical projects for live audiences. Meanwhile, protests and counterprotests — some violent — were happening worldwide. Crowds, he realized, had "deeply positive associations and deeply scary associations and I was interested in exploring how those intersected."

For the Moynihan project, Frankel videotaped people walking through public spaces in New York over the course of a single day. He then edited the footage to 25 figures, including a dog and a pigeon, that he reproduced by hand as animation cels. He felt he was "casting an ensemble."

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The artist Joshua Frankel's animation, "Within the crowd there is a quality," in being projected on four large LED screens at Moynihan Train Hall until November 14. Credit...George Etheredge for The New York Times

"Within the crowd there is a quality" plays on a phrase from a 1960 book, "Crowds and Power," by Elias Canetti, a 1981 Nobel laureate in literature. It explored the pathology of crowds of all kinds — from Mecca pilgrims to soccer fans, from the dawn of history through the rise of Fascism, with a special interest in the ways crowds can coalesce, cohere and collapse, and the chaos they can create. It was written in the wake of World War II, which Canetti — a Jew who fled the Nazis — saw at close range.

However, there are "plenty of things about the book that are weird and don't age well," Frankel cautioned. Over the course of Frankel's video at Moynihan, pedestrians crisscross the four screens, synchronize their steps, and then fall out of pace again. It's deliberately subtle; Frankel learned from his own experience with art in the nearby schoolyard of P.S. 41 that public art can reward repeated viewings.

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A video by Joshua Frankel, "Within the crowd there is a quality," is shown at the Moynihan Train Station in New York. The artist sourced its images in the city's public spaces, selecting 25 characters.



Animation cels of images of people, with strollers, a beanie, a bowler, for the video "Within the crowd there is a quality." Credit...Joshua Frankel

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His practice includes public murals, some created with his wife, the artist Eve Biddle. She co-directs the Wassaic Project, an artist-run community in New York's Dutchess County, where she and Frankel are raising their two children. A former horse barn now houses their art studios (his is filled with cyanotypes, film stills and a desk dripping with wires from a triptych of monitors).

Debra Simon, the curator of Art at Amtrak, has long been fascinated by the patterns people make, often inadvertently, in the public spaces where she has focused her career, likening them to improvised flash-mob performances.

Simon was first impressed by Frankel's work in 2017 when she saw an excerpt from "A Marvelous Order," an opera that he had conceived with the composer Judd Greenstein and the former U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith, on the epic battles between Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs over the fate of New York's public spaces and street life.

Frankel directed the presentation, with live music and vocalists, and it featured his animations across roughly 50 video screens on several levels of Manhattan's Fulton Center transit hub, as part of the River to River Festival (which Simon co-founded). The full opera premiered at Penn State's Center for the Performing Arts in 2021, receiving a rave review from *The Wall Street Journal*, and Frankel is planning to announce its return to the stage in 2024. (Another play on a similar subject, by David Hare, called "Straight Line Crazy," opened last year at the Shed.)

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"A Marvelous Order," directed and co-created by Joshua Frankel, at the Center for Performing Arts at Penn State, 2022. Credit...Robert Bloom

At Hesse Flatow, where Frankel will show paintings, sculpture, and video art Nov. 1-18, he has created a centerpiece with the animation cels from his Moynihan project, hanging them in Lucite cases from the gallery ceiling to create a kinetic cloud of figures in motion.

His paintings portray crowds too. "I wanted that kinetic energy that only hand and brush can bring to explore the feeling of losing oneself in a crowd — for better or worse — that words, even Canetti's, can't express." — Laura van Straaten