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The Artist Creating a 150-Foot-Long Glass Rainbow

This summer, Sarah Cain will bring a high-art tradition into an unexpected setting: the San Francisco International Airport.



The artist Sarah Cain, at Judson Studios in Los Angeles, with stained-glass windows from her new installation for the San Francisco airport.
Philip Cheung



By Alice Newell-Hanson

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The first paintings that Sarah Cain remembers admiring as a teenager were works by Joan Mitchell, Philip Guston and Robert Motherwell which, thanks to a public arts fund, lined the walls of an otherwise dismal underground mall in Albany, N.Y., not far from where she grew up, in Kinderhook. “My parents didn’t really take me to museums, so that is where I saw the first real art, mixed in with shops and a McDonald’s,” says Cain, who is now 40 and an established artist herself. In July, she will unveil a major public work of her own, a 150-foot-long series of 37 vividly colorful stained-glass windows, funded by the San Francisco Arts Commission, which she hopes will inspire passers-by in an equally unlikely setting: the new AirTrain terminal at the city’s international airport.

BROADWAY

Cain lived in San Francisco for 10 years in the late 1990s and early 2000s; she studied art at the San Francisco Art Institute, and later Berkeley, then stayed in the area, making ephemeral large-scale paintings inside the abandoned buildings where her artist friends squatted. The San Francisco airport installation, her first permanent public work, channels the outsider ethos of those early pieces as well as the rainbow-colored prismatic compositions of her more recent paintings and drawings, but stained glass is a relatively new medium for her.



At Cain's studio in the Garvanza neighborhood of Los Angeles, a plan for the finished work, which will contain glass in over 270 different colors, is pinned to the wall above a sample panel.
Philip Cheung

Now based in Los Angeles, Cain works in a sun-washed 800-square-foot converted garage perched on a hilltop in the city's historic Garvanza neighborhood, overlooking a small garden of lemon, orange and apricot trees. On a visit in December, she explained that her interest in stained glass began with the Hollyhock House, Frank Lloyd Wright's 1921 Mayan Revival-style residence in East Hollywood. In recent years, she has taken multiple tours of the property to see, in particular, a small gallery encased in clear glass windows with occasional amber and lavender-colored fragments worked into their geometrically patterned panes. When she discovered that the company responsible for the work, Judson Studios, was not only still operational (founded in 1897, it is the oldest family-run stained-glass studio in the U.S.) but also headquartered in a ramshackle 1910 Craftsman-style house less than a mile from her own home, she knew that she wanted to work with the studio for her San Francisco commission.

BROADWAY



Cain's cat Tommy, between the artist's paintings "Power Shifts" (left) and "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" (right).
Philip Cheung

A five-minute drive down the hill from her work space, eight of the finished panels were on display at Judson Studios' new 2,000-square-foot workshop in South Pasadena, awaiting transport to San Francisco. The completed work will incorporate panes of glass in over 270 colors, framed in soldered zinc, which Cain has painstakingly arranged so that no two adjoining fragments are the same shade. "If a work is going to span that much space, you want the viewer to keep discovering things," she says.

Elsewhere in the studio, artisans were piecing together a biblical scene for the window of a Los Angeles megachurch. Stained glass is thought to have originated in the churches of 11th-century France and Germany, and while several modern artists have experimented with the medium — including Henri Matisse, at his Rosary Chapel in southern France, and Sigmar Polke, at the Grossmünster in Zurich — they have largely done so within a traditional ecclesiastical setting. Cain, though, will take the art form out of the church and into what is now one of the most heavily trafficked of all spaces: the airport terminal. "I just love the surprise of it," she says. "Maybe this will also be a destination that teenagers will want to see."