

GAGOSIAN

WSJ.
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL MAGAZINE

The Artist Making LaGuardia Airport Beautiful Again
The Artist Making LaGuardia Airport Beautiful Again

Cody Delistraty



PHOTO: SARAH SZE

“In the middle, a document of Mahatma Gandhi’s life from this very quirky museum called Birla House [now called Gandhi Smriti] in New Delhi. In front, on the black stone, handmade rings. I really don’t wear jewelry; when I got married, I thought, Should we wear rings? I thought it would be interesting to actually make them, so I made one for my husband [author and oncologist Siddhartha Mukherjee]. One of the rings my older daughter made for me. The rings are on a Chinese inkstone. There’s a depression to hold the ink, which feels like the way water would erode it. You don’t know what part of it is a natural gesture or a handmade gesture. In the back, an ukiyo-e print book, which is out-of-print and collectible. It’s really beautiful. Atop that book and the Gandhi document are two of my favorite paints. The book in the middle right is a Chinese painting book. My great aunt on my Chinese side was a painter, and she gave that to me when I was a child. Beneath everything are my grandmother’s dresses. She passed away when I was in my teens, and she left me all of her clothes. They’re like a diary of her life and her body. In the middle left, a collage my younger daughter made. It’s a very sophisticated composition

that's reminiscent of a Russian constructivist poster and a dada poem. In the back on the right, blue string and blue tape. I often use them both in paintings and sculptures. Those are atop a neon-green safety vest I wore on-site putting up my sculpture [Shorter than the Day] at LaGuardia Airport. The painting behind everything is just a painting that I'm working on in my studio. This whole picture is taken on my studio floor. In the back left, a broken wine glass. I started making sculptures out of things that were broken. Whenever anything breaks in the house, it goes onto this shelf, where it waits to become a sculpture."

—As told to Cody Delistraty



From A TO SZE The artist Sarah Sze has recently been questioning the human relationship to time. "How do we measure time?" she asks. "I think a lot of it is measured emotionally." PHOTO: BRIGITTE LACOMBE.

With the recent installation of a large-scale sculpture at New York's LaGuardia Airport, an exhibition at Gagosian Paris and an upcoming one at Paris' Fondation Cartier, the inventive artist is spending the year investigating humanity's most basic perceptions.

This summer, the artist Sarah Sze unveiled an artwork in a place relatively devoid of the usual crowds. Pulled from a line in an Emily Dickinson poem, Sze's *Shorter than the Day* sculpture opened at LaGuardia Airport in New York City in its new Terminal B. Commissioned by LaGuardia Gateway Partners in partnership with Public Art Fund, the work is composed of metal rods and hundreds of photographs taken of the New York sky over the course of a day. With the red blaze of noon and the ember glow of dusk, Sze's work captures a rare feeling of seeing time pass before one's eyes.

Amid the pandemic, time, Sze says, has taken on a different quality. "The measuring of time, of what happened last week or half an hour ago is strangely skewed," she says. Increasingly, she adds, it takes on an emotional quality.

Next up, Sze continues her exploration of time with an exhibition set to open this fall in Paris at the Fondation Cartier. Some of her artworks there will be staged in darkness, inspired by planetariums. Another work is a mirrored structure, set beneath a pendulum with ceiling-mounted projectors beaming images into the concave space below. Here, she speaks with *WSJ*. about her recent artwork, her changing sense of time and the ways in which the pandemic is also affecting art and intimacy.

What was it like working on your LaGuardia artwork during lockdown?

We were installing there when the pandemic hit, and we wanted to meet this deadline so that it could be open on time, so we continued to work through the pandemic. If I became an essential worker, my studio became essential work. That was designated, legally, that we could work there as essential workers.

What inspired the *Shorter than the Day* artwork itself? What are you hoping to evoke in the people who see it?

Even if we're not using the airport heavily—and we shouldn't be—it was about seeing movement forward into the future. I was interested in the idea of timekeeping and how time is so fragile and volatile when you travel. I love traveling, the kind of excitement and expectation that you're in this realm where time and space become completely disorienting and you reorient yourself in a different time and place. The work is actually a photograph that I took over the sky of New York over the time of a full day, a 24-hour period. At the window, where you look into the piece is where the night is. It starts at dawn and then it goes to dusk. So it really follows the way light travels over a day. A lot of the time my work has a kind of kinetic quality—in videos; I do sculpture—but when you move around it, moving around it actually makes it move in time, so it has a filmic quality.

I think an airport is a portal to a city. Whether you're exiting or you're entering, even if you don't consciously acknowledge that, you have an intense moment of relationship with a place upon landing or upon departing. There's an emotional connection to that place, an anticipation of either arriving or departing.

Has your artwork and thinking about time taken on a different significance post-pandemic?

This idea of how you keep time and how we frame time is something that people are experiencing in very both personal and public ways. How do we measure time? I think a lot of it is measured emotionally, especially as you grow older, you remember something in your past and you remember things that happened to you and they take up an entire year. You remember what happened when you're 9 years old in maybe one event. How we experience and develop time is something that's been really intimately experienced by everyone in this very sudden and dramatic shift.

Has the pandemic changed your thinking as an artist at all?

There's this huge acceleration in my own life on the importance of images. I think images are replacing objects in many ways. The pandemic has been a stark experiment in that because so much communication is forcibly done through the screen. The question of, What does that do? We don't know. We're experiencing an experiment in how to communicate, collaborate, express intimacy through images. I think that's really going to be a part of our conversation moving forward, even after we have more access to interaction in real time and in real space.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.