



## High-tech art welcomes passengers at San Jose International Airport

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Earthlings, be warned. There's a 26-foot-tall space robot with waving, propeller-tipped arms in Terminal B at California's Mineta San Jose International Airport.

There's no need to be frightened. In fact, you might want to build in a little extra time to get to know this new creature. The giant, three-legged, glossy white *Space Observer* was created by artist Björn Schülke and is just one of more than a dozen high-tech works of art commissioned specifically for the airport's futuristic-looking new 12-gate terminal, which opened for business earlier this month.

Each piece was chosen not only for its ability to entertain and/or engage passengers, but to let them know where they are. "An airport is a gateway to a community," says Mary Rubin, the city official managing the airport public art project, "So this is a wonderful opportunity to let people know they've arrived in San Jose, which is the capital of Silicon Valley."



Bjorn Schülke's 26-foot-tall "Space Observer" greets passengers in Terminal B at San Jose International Airport.

### You're definitely not in Kansas

In San Jose, 2% of any municipal capital improvement project must be set aside for public art. (Many cities have similar programs.) So the funds for the new artwork came from the \$1.3 billion the airport budgeted for the modernization of Terminal A and for the construction of both Terminal B and a consolidated on-airport parking/rental car garage.

The garage opened for business on June 30 and sports a seven-story-high mural depicting the hands of 53 Silicon Valley residents. Visible from the highway, Christian Moeller's *Hands* mural wasn't applied onto the facade of the garage in a traditional manner. Instead, Moeller mapped out the image with a computer program and then used 400,000 snap-on plastic disks to create a giant pixilated image on architectural chain-link mesh.

### What does innovation look like?

Back inside Terminal B, there's plenty more art to see – and to hear. For *Sonic Gateway*, noted San Francisco sound artist Bill Fontana created audio compositions that can be heard in some of the fixed bridges going to and from the airplanes. "As you leave San Jose," says airport public art project director Mary Rubin, "you'll hear a soundscape from the city your plane is flying to. When you come back, the audio you hear will be the sounds of San Jose."

In the center-point of the terminal concourse, look up to see – and watch —*eCloud*, a sculpture by Nik Hafermaas, Dan Goods and Aaron Koblin. The weather-dependent artwork is made of

more than 2,000 switchable glass squares that can change from opaque to transparent every 45 seconds depending on a stream of real-time weather data being fed from cities all over the world.

And then there's the aquarium. To San Jose dentist Tram Nguyen, heading off to Seattle last week to see a friend in the hospital, the fish tank was a soothing amenity. But this tank has underwater cameras and video screens and is actually a piece of art. In *Dreaming F.I.D.S.*, by Ben Hooker and Shona Kitchen, security system images and pictures of people looking into the tank appear on the underwater screens. ("We're seeing what the fish are seeing," is the way one traveler explained it to his companion.) Meant to be a statement about the prevalence of surveillance in modern society, *Dreaming F.I.D.S.* is located directly opposite the security checkpoint.

Most every piece of art in the new terminal incorporates or makes reference to modern technology, which seems only appropriate for an airport that serves as the gateway to Silicon Valley. But Mary Rubin says innovative use of technology wasn't the main criteria for the team choosing the art. "We didn't just want an innovative art program. We wanted art that showed what innovation looks like. There's a difference."

### **Out with the old. Almost.**

Now that the swanky new Terminal B is open, Mineta San Jose International Airport will go ahead with plans to raze the old Terminal C. Until last week, that demolition was to include the destruction of an 18-foot-tall, 30-foot-wide painting that has been attached to a wall in the terminal's main hall since 1977. The mural depicts the history of the San Jose region and was the last painting made by the late California artist Millard Sheets, who also created the mural known as *Touchdown Jesus* at the University of Notre Dame.

Art conservators told airport officials that because the mural had been glued to the wall, there was no way to remove the painting without ruining it. Plans to rescue the entire mural were abandoned and instead the airport arranged to have high-quality digital photos taken so a copy of the mural could be installed in another terminal.

But last week, as proof that sometimes innovation requires good old-fashioned inspiration and a lot of perspiration, Millard Sheets' son Tony and a crew of construction workers were able to get the mural off the wall intact. According to the *Mercury News*, "They simply peeled the ends of the mural and attached them to long poles — in this case, plastic and copper pipes scavenged from the old terminal — and rolled the mural off, sort of like tightly rolling up a sleeping bag."

Now the plan is to get the sheetrock off the back of the mural, restore it and install the original in the airport's international terminal. "We weren't hopeful," says the city's Mary Rubin, "but now we're just thrilled."