

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Theses

Lehman College

---

2021

### ENDURING COVID-19 AS NYC SUBWAY RIDERS

Ruben Cuevas

*Lehman College City University of New York*, [ruben.cuevas@lc.cuny.edu](mailto:ruben.cuevas@lc.cuny.edu)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/le\\_etds/16](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/le_etds/16)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).  
Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

# **ENDURING COVID-19 AS NYC SUBWAY RIDERS**

A dissertation submitted to the Lehman College Faculty in Art Department in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

## **Master in Art Education**

at

Herbert H. Lehman College (The City University of New York)

By

## **Ruben Cuevas**

Department of Art, History and Education Department

Lehman College (The City University of New York)

Advisor: Professor Danielle Tegeder

Spring/2021

### **Acknowledgement:**

I would like to first express my deepest gratitude to my savior Jesus the son of David, who equipped me with the needed tools and determination to fulfill this task. I am so thankful to my advisor Professor Tegeder for her extra dedication and guidance every step of the way. A special thanks to the Art Department Faculty for their support and willingness to help me in the midst of this viral pandemic. I deeply appreciate the encouragement and support of my art classmates through the online application Slack.

Last but not least to my family for creating a peaceful atmosphere for my artistic expressions. In particular I am grateful to my loving wife Monserrath for her support and patience throughout my master education. Special thanks to my daughter Stephanie for her keen eye and honest criticism. To my daughter Sophie for her support and consistent assistance.

**Abstract:**

My thesis paper describes my master art project of paintings about the New York City Subway riders commuting routine prior and during the Coronavirus. As a regular subway rider myself I am closely connected with this particular art project because I witnessed the subway riders endure the most contagious viral pandemic of the 21st century. My thesis recounts how from a few sketches and photo shots of people in the subway this art project developed into a collection of paintings carefully completed on large linen canvas and acrylic medium. The initial set of my paintings narrate typical NYC subway rider routines prior to the arrival of Covid-19. Mainly portraits of persons riding alone; families socializing; visitors planning their next destinations, etc. However, the remaining set of paintings, completed during the pandemic, depict riders absorbed in a tense and unpleasant NYC subway routine evidently revealing the signs of a dire pandemic. Primarily, my thesis paper mostly emphasizes how the global viral pandemic of Covid-19 altered in a significant degree our NYC subway rider's routine. Now riders consistently wear face masks, mind social distance and avoid social interactions. As illustrated through my paintings and accentuated in my thesis paper, these required sanitary rules and adapted safety measures clearly transformed the once lively ambience of the NYC subway commute. Just as embodied in my thesis document, it is evident that we, loyal NYC subway riders, have been profoundly affected by the intrusive Coronavirus. Yet, we also know that hope is on the horizon.

**KEYWORDS**

Covid-19 pandemic in New York City Subway System, subway arts, infectious virus in public places, visual and historical references on viral transmission in New York City.

ADVISER-READER NAME [print] Dannielle Tegeder

DATE 5/25/21

THESIS ADVISER SIGNATURE 

DATE 5/25/21

GRADUATE ADVISER SIGNATURE 

DATE 5/25/21

## ENDURING COVID-19 AS NYC SUBWAY RIDERS

As I began my art classes in my master's program, I discovered that I was interested in drawing and painting people. Since I ride the New York City Subway regularly, I desired to sketch and paint portraits of people while riding on it. As a figurative artist, I based my art master project on painting about people's social interactions and emotional peculiarities in order to portray their humanity as they commute in the NYC Subway. Fortunately, the NYC subway system offered me an exceptional opportunity to be with people from all walks of life and consider them for my art project. To some degree, I was able to capture their individuality with my camera or pencil as I learned how they socially interacted among themselves and with others while in the subway. As a result of these many people's observations in my numerous NYC subway brief commutes to my job in Midtown Manhattan, drawing and painting fellow subway riders evolved into my art project for the master's art program. An art project that suddenly took a new visual and emotional twist on its underlying message as soon as the Coronavirus appeared in New York.

As a NYC subway rider for over twenty years, I found it somewhat effortless to relate to the fellow riders I illustrated riding in the subway. Although I am quite familiar with the typical subway riders' routine, I am certain there is uniqueness to each passenger's experiences that are often manifested completely unexpected. Anything can take place on NYC subways! As a regular NYC subway rider, I constantly encountered diverse people's reactions and unforeseen social situations that I believe can only take place in NYC subway. The NYC subway is one of the few massive transportation systems in the world that mobilize and converge more than two millions of people from all nationalities and cultures.

I sketched and painted several of my NYC subway portraits prior to the advent of Covid-19 pandemic. Since the last major viral pandemic in 1918 there have not been any major viral surges in the NYC subway. My initial

paintings recollect those calm and less stressful moments in our subway. I watched riders go along with their planned routines as they headed to their intended destinations, meanwhile some riding tourists over watching the subway map with their disoriented countenances wished for some city touring clarifications. Some people talked to each other, while others just surfed the web on their cell phones. A mother tried to appease her toddler as a passerby rudely stared at her. Unexpectedly a loud person entered our already crowded space from the next wagon and unapologetically distracted a dozing off senior person bluntly asking for money. Certainly anything can happen in our active NYC subway and still fall into what we, local New Yorkers, consider a normal NYC subway routine. These and other social manifestations were part of many interesting and humorous subways' encounters that I recall during the completion of my first set of paintings.

Often sketching or photographing unknown people while traveling in a crowded train like our NYC subway was an unpredictable and challenging process. Finding suitable scenes and opportune social occasions for my art project among riders was the most difficult aspect of this art project. Furthermore, I had no idea how people would react when noticing my intent to sketch them. I learned that most people would feel uncomfortable when I drew a portrait of them or their families without their knowledge. When I had the opportunity I would ask for their approval and tell them about my school art project. Although I was discreet and respectful I often felt that I was invading their personal spaces. Therefore, my paintings done prior to the appearance of Covid-19 illustrated diverse groups of people with their unique characteristics in their subway commuting routine. Here are just a few of these moments: I painted a pleasant portrait of a couple of tween boys as they played an online



An interesting Online Game

game on a mobile phones; a quietly sitting teen girl surfing the web; an Asian man reading a Chinese newspaper about president Donald Trump and his convictions; a flamboyant tourist with his cool glasses as he holds some purchased items; a relaxed senior



A Long, Noisy and Boring Ride



My Social World

lady riding with her poppy dog; a deeply pensive man covering his face apparently overwhelmed by his life's dire situations. Regardless of the diversity of persons in my selections, the subway environment portrayed in my paintings mostly remained unchanged. There were a few design variations in terms of the light sources and my chosen angle



I Also Go Shopping

to have a decent photo shoot. For instance, prior to taking any photos I carefully took into account the gray color walls, the framed NYC subway city map, the striking blue seats, and elongated stainless steel poles. Compositionally, they all served the paintings



Taken On A Ride

well as balancing foreground sections in relation to the main subjects. With mixed and often saturated acrylic medium I applied on my smoothed white linens the needed colors on stretched canvases sizes 24" x 36" and 36" x 48". A laborious artistic task to follow as I remained honest to my observations of people and situations during my NYC subway trips.



Long Ride and Heavy Load

I, as everyone in our routine NYC subway commutes, never anticipated that our habitual routine would dramatically be altered by an unknown foreign virus. My painting's fundamental social narrative as riders in the NYC subway was suddenly subjected to unexpected changes. Although my painting style and color remained unaltered, in order to remain truthful to the subject portrayal I was required to add other recognized emotional and depictive elements. I have to accept that my already planned out NYC subway art project would completely shift and portrait persons whose subway routine included protecting themselves and their families from a highly contagious virus. As in a surreal reality we found ourselves apparently suspended on an imaginary twilight

subway ride with unclear destinations. For long weeks and seemingly endless subway commutes we remained oblivious before an invisible real and destructive menace. For more than a hundred years the United States and world did not encounter such a devastating viral outbreak. From the city of Wuhan in China to our American cities, this highly infectious disease in a few months transformed into a Global pandemic and almost paralyzed our metropolitan transportation system. As a result of it, the arrival of the Covid- 19 pandemic altered our commuting routine with the imposing of new sanitary mandates and social requirements. In consequence, the paintings that I completed after the initial outbreak of Covid- 19, around March of 2020, allowed me to document through them the sudden changes instituted in the NYC subway system regarding personal protection — Subway's riders were mandated by the State of New York to wear protective masks, regularly wash their hands and follow social distance. These safety personal changes were never before required of NYC subway riders. For many, wearing protective masks created a sense of new self-awareness underlined with tension and fear as they found themselves riding in constricted spaces with other unfamiliar persons. Simple and casual subway's conversations were avoided. It seemed that being exposed to Covid-19 inside a NYC subway car was almost unavoidable. For instance, I noticed that a mere sneeze by someone in the same wagon would have created a wave of apprehension and alertness among those seated close by, particularly if the person removed his/her protective mask in the process. Disturbingly, due to the massive media coverage on Covid-19, mostly everyone riding on the NY subway were aware that the health implications associated with this unfamiliar virus were often detrimental. No one could have predicted that the normal NYC subway riding routine would be affected significantly upon the arrival of such a highly infectious virus. The normal commuting subway schedule was dramatically reduced to a degree that many thought its service would cease. For a few long months the crowded platforms of our NYC subway alluded to the deserted roads of a ghost town. Many subway commuters chose to commute by cars rather than by the subway. I also faced some challenges related to Covid-19 virus as I tried to complete some of my paintings during this uncertain period. While in the subway,



I found myself regularly applying sanitizer on my hands, readjusting my mask and keeping some distance from others, as I tried to complete my sketches and photo shots of people. Unlike prior to Covid-19 outbreak, quite a few steps preceded the taking of my photos in the subway. It certainly became a more demanding duty in the process of completing my art objective as I encountered other challenges. For example I was placed on furlough from my job and it came to be another endurance test on finishing this art project as I continue riding the NYC subway. On a more personal note, During these tough and perilous moments I encountered the loss of a dear cousin of mine. On one occasion I considered quitting this arduous art project and step away from it. A truly hard choice for me to take particularly when this project became such a significant artistic process of documenting through my paintings this crucial moment in our lives. It was a significant and defining time in our society that allowed me to personally narrate through my art project the enduring experience of NYC subway riders during Covid-19. The danger and the subtle fear perceived throughout the NYC subway system was clearly justified, yet I remained active with my art task at hand.

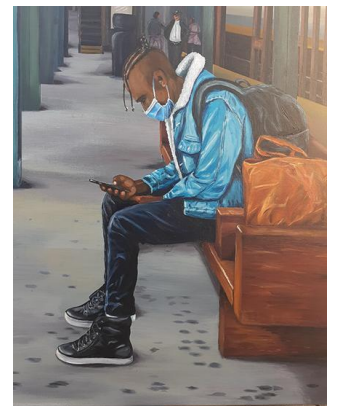
It appeared that us, the brave subway riders, braced together to face the most dangerous and challenging viral pandemic of the 21st century. Although with deep concerns, it was one of those occasions that I, as a New Yorker, felt a sense of pride never experienced before. As I grabbed my sketchbook and camera again, I recognized that this health crisis revealed amply the NYC subway riders' indomitable spirit, a remarkable human quality worth capturing through my paintings. Therefore, with great determination and profound honesty I resolved to portrait and narrate how we NYC subway's riders coped and bravely endured this highly contagious viral plague. The spread of the Coronavirus in the New York City subway increased as I embarked on my thesis art project. The sanitary changes promulgated by the New York State Governor, Mario Cuomo were urgent and precise, for that matter, I quickly adapted my painting compositions to the new reality taking place in the city subway transportation. Never envisioned before, a new social narrative for my remaining paintings quickly unfolded before me. Nevertheless, I continued with my task despite the threat of the unknown

virus as I rode with others in the confined spaces of our NYC subway cars and painted what I observed and felt in people. I considered this art project a mission rendered to me to document through paintings the grim reality that subway riders faced during those months and still facing today as they endure the existent plight. This time the subjects in my 36" x 48" linen canvases expressed, as they were their masks and mind social distance, the somber reality of their daily subway commutes during this unprecedented pandemic. Again, I carried on with my art assignment portraits, despite the widespread health crisis. Considering the health crisis, I was very mindful about invading people's personal spaces, especially since they were oblivious to my artistic intentions and mind more their personal spaces. Nevertheless, with my pencil and camera I waited patiently and focused on the opportune moment and space when I could capture that singular emotional weight which could only be rooted in such a destructive pandemic.



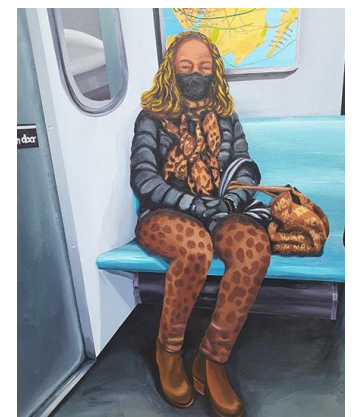
NYC Subway Social Distance

The set of paintings finished during Covid-19 are diverse and distinctly describe a different social narrative. Clearly, this invasive plight has put to test our lively and affable nature compelling us to adapt a different social behavior. For instance, in the painting of two persons sitting next to each other on two adjacent seats, there is an attempt to maintain some degree of physical distance. Creating some



Getting Late

unusual distance it was quite an impossible task considering sitting in the constricted two seat space areas of a NYC subway car. The self-awareness of space was quite evident. There is a more optimistic feeling in the portrait of an elegant lady sitting alone in one of the long seats. As she appeared full of energy, she made sure her mask matched her trendy and elegant outfit. While sitting on the bench of a midtown subway station, along with his bookbags, my painting of a teenage boy



Trendy Ride

tells us that his education remains a priority. He clearly was one of the few students that attended school in person because most of the schools taught their classes online. My portrait of the homeless person distinctively conveys an unusual level of submission and profound emotional resignation before a monstrous virus that appears undefeatable. Despite facing patiently what seemed to be a life of struggles and seclusion this person humbly abides by the sanitary



My Home Window

rules and correctly wears a facial mask. It seems that her main concern is to solve her crossword puzzle as long as she gets some light through what she considers her home window. As I focused my camera lens in her direction, I recall that I could hardly notice her gentle wrinkled face behind her darkened blue protective mask and oversized hat. Certainly, as she grabbed her large bags and covered her body with a thick quilt, she clearly symbolizes the enduring detrimental reality faced by many homeless people as they are compelled to make the NYC subway cars their place to stay, particularly in the midst of a ravaging pandemic. The painting of two Hasidic young men sitting next to each other gives us a sense that this pandemic knows no credo or social status. However, through faith and emotional endurance many around the world survived this human calamity



Faithful Ride

to then testify of their ordeals. As they sit by themselves wearing their protective mask they abide with the social distance rules as defined by the health department. I am honored to have captured in my paintings, with solemn dignity, each of these intimate moments of people who bravely elevate the NYC subway system and further dignify us all as we collectively

endure this unprecedented world health crisis. Clearly, the Covid-19 crisis remains uncertain and menacing yet our attitude and determination to move forward remains unbowed.

As I concluded my art thesis project Covid-19 changed the characteristics of my NYC Subway's painting experience. Yet because of it, I further assessed the essence of what it is to be human while riding in NYC subway and empathize with other commuters in a reality filled with despair and uncertainty. I realized that during this pandemic most of the subway riders modified their social behavior. Clearly, I sensed a high degree of social distancing and a premeditated mood underlined with uncertainty; however, with new health awareness, people ride the NYC subway again. Evidently, this pandemic changed the way we subway riders act and interact with one another in our limited subway car environment. After more than twenty years of riding the NYC subway, I never imagined a similar situation in the once so crowded NYC transportation system. This highly infectious virus has challenged us all and has defined, hopefully for now, new social awareness and health protocols. These health ordinances suddenly evolved into a survival and protective mechanism which had often been disregarded rudely or unconsciously. Like extracted from the pages of a distant troubled world, now due to Covid-19, everyone is required to wear protective masks while riding the subway. That mask has become the main obvious and symbolic reminder of an obscure and invincible mortal enemy. It is quite a marked contrast to what we had known prior to this phage invasion. Despite the viral menace continuing, I sense an unbreakable feeling of hope among New Yorkers. Clearly, it is a fervent optimism that we NYC subway riders embrace as we obey the social distancing rules and become vaccinated. As portrayed in each of my paintings prior to the pandemic, I am certain that we will endure and defeat this viral pandemic as we continue to ride the legendary NYC subway cars.

Through my subway paintings, I focused on presenting the commuting routine of New Yorkers in the NYC subway transportation system prior and after the devastating Coronavirus. In the completion of this art thesis project, I learned that from all walks of life and diverse social backgrounds, we all become active participants in the metropolitan New York City, extraordinarily mobilized on the centennial rail of steels and concrete platforms. Unfortunately, Covid-19 rose to the level of extremely unpleasant occasions. Yet, I'm optimistic that

New Yorkers and its tourists will someday soon ride on a subway car without a need of mandated social distance, uncomfortable masks, and certainly without Covid-19. Until more of us are vaccinated, we just have to make it through this uncommon ride that has extended far beyond our typical NYC subway commuting experience. Enduring Covid-19 as NYC subway riders has been our greatest challenge as we advance through uncertainty and get used to a new normal. Perhaps in a not so distant future someone will look at these NYC subway's paintings and realize that we NYC subway riders have prevailed.