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Artist Transforms Bleak Bridge Walk Into Urban Dream



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When Chris Doyle wiped his forehead in the noon sunshine yesterday, the flecks of gold leaf on his fingers sparkled like glitter. Beneath his feet, the corroded pedestrian stairway on the Manhattan side of the Williamsburg Bridge gleamed, with the fruit of his labor, like the vault at Fort Knox. A steady stream of pedestrians, many carrying bicycles over their shoulders, made their way up or down, most of them visibly nonplused to be walking a gilded ladder.

"Oh," a man said, descending. "Gold steps."

Mr. Doyle, a 36-year-old Manhattan artist, watched him go.

"There have been a lot of 'Wizard of Oz' and 'Stairway to Heaven' references," he said.

Since last Thursday, Mr. Doyle (say his name fast and it could almost be Christo) and several assistants have been applying 22-karat gold leaf to the stairway, the Manhattan-side link to a well-used but decrepit walkway across the East River to Brooklyn. They plan to finish by the end of today; an official "opening" is to be held tomorrow at 6 P.M., hopefully with the afternoon sun glinting off the gold steps in a blinding sheet.

It's unusual-looking, to be sure. Startling even. But is it, you know? . . .

Mr. Doyle laughed.

"I'm not sure it matters whether it falls into the category of art," he said. "Whether or not it's arty is less important than that it has an effect on the day-to-day lives of the people who use it."

"Commutable," as Mr. Doyle calls the \$7,500 project, is the first of three new site-specific works by young artists financed by the Public Art Fund under the rubric "In the Public Realm." Mr. Doyle, whose work generally focuses on mixed-media installations, said that in this case, it wasn't an object he wanted to construct; he didn't want something that people had to walk around and look at.

"I wanted to do something people use," he said.

The gilding of the steps, he said, is his attempt to draw attention to, if not glorify, a benighted spot on the New York map that he and others frequently use.

And indeed, it is a grim location in need of cheer. With the bridge being renovated, the whole area seems torn up. The entrance to the walkway is thoroughly graffiti-marked, the walkway itself is strewn with trash and debris (and is dangerously unlighted after dark) and, according to the testimony of Mr. Doyle and the supporting evidence of discarded needles, the stairway is a haven for junkies.

"It's one of the bleakest spots in Manhattan, but I like this place," Mr. Doyle said. Because residents said the sandblasting of the bridge had sent flakes of lead-based paint floating into the neighborhoods below (the work was halted by a court order early in the summer), "I thought it would be nice to give the community some gold," Mr. Doyle said.

The Public Art Fund, which has presented almost 300 art projects in New York City since 1977 (its best known project being the Botero sculptures along Park Avenue), chose Mr. Doyle and two other artists from 350 who applied for the "In the Public Realm" program. (The other works, to be unveiled this fall, are Jackie Chang's "Changing Places," a series of colorful commercial awnings at the Metrotech Center in Brooklyn, and "The Canal Street Subway Project," by Alexander Brodsky, who will be creating a water-filled canal with life-sized gondolas in an unused section of track in the Canal Street subway station.)

"It's an opportunity for under-recognized artists to create public work," said Susan Freedman, the president of the fund, whose annual budget is about \$625,000, more than two-thirds of which

comes from private donations and grants. (The rest is from a combination of city, state and Federal money.) Regarding "Commutable," she said she liked the symbolism of the work: "streets paved with gold" for the immigrant population coming over the bridge.

Mr. Doyle got a \$5,000 grant for "Commutable," plus a \$2,500 artist's fee, all of which has been used to buy materials, including 11,500 3-inch squares of 22-karat gilding.