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Straphanger art: Perusing the CTA Collection

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Carla Arocha and Stéphane Schraenen's stainless steel sculpture titled 24/7, suspended overhead celebrates the dynamic activity that occurs day and night in the Howard station. Circular stainless steel plates, polished to a mirror finish, are draped together using fasteners custom-designed by the artists. A pattern of laser-cut holes scatters across the surface of the plates creating secondary circular patterns. As one moves through the space of the sculpture, the perception of circles reflected within circles is intensified.

If you enter the CTA's Howard station and look up, you will be gazing at the most valuable piece of art owned by the transit agency.

Worth some \$154,000, the one-ton stainless steel hanging art work created by a former Chicagoan and a Belgian is the most valuable public art piece among more than 50 that decorate some 40 CTA stations, officials say.

The cat was let out of the bag about the artwork's value Wednesday, after CTA Law Department risk manager Judith Tancula told board members that an updated list of CTA assets — from art to rolling stock — put their total value at \$6.36 billion.

That's up 2.2 percent from last year and includes "a little over \$5 million in art," with the highest-valued at any one station worth \$150,000, Tancula said.

CTA officials later identified their most expensive piece, based on its insured amount, as a work called "24/7" that is insured for its replacement value of \$154,050.

The massive hanging structure is a creation of Carla Arocha, a former Chicagoan with a master's degree in art from the University of Chicago, and Stéphane Schraenen of Belgium.

One Chicago art expert said she's not surprised the pair's creation is the CTA's most valuable.

The stainless steel hanging artwork, weighing in at one ton, was "ridiculously expensive to fabricate" and challenging to install, said Monique Meloche, the artistic pair's U.S. representative and owner of a Chicago gallery that bears her name.

It's composed of dozens of stainless steel discs, polished to a mirrored finish and laser-cut with a pattern of computer-designed holes. Hanging from the ceiling of the Howard station, it is definitely "major in scale," Meloche said.

Reflections from the nearby window and movement in the Howard station that serves the Red, Yellow

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and Purple lines mean that there's "always something activating" the sculpture, "which is why they call it 24/7," Meloche said.

Arocha was born in Venezuela, but moved to Chicago, where she obtained an undergraduate degree in biology from St. Xavier University, Meloche said. She went on to earn a bachelor's degree in fine arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a master's in arts from the University of Chicago.

Both Arocha and Schraenen now live and work in Belgium, but they have been in some "very important" museum exhibitions "all over the place," including in Belgium, Spain, Berlin and London, Meloche said. Their work will be exhibited in a show at the St. Louis Contemporary Art Museum in September.\

The Howard station sculpture was purchased through the federally-funded Arts in Transit program. Other CTA pieces were created through the CTA's Adopt-A-Station program.

The CTA's art collection can be viewed online at <http://www.transitchicago.com/art/>

<http://www.suntimes.com/news/20705681-418/straphanger-art-perusing-the-cta-collection.html>