

The New York Times
Arts & Leisure

SUNDAY JUNE, 27, 2004

The Carpet That Ate Grand Central

Commuters to Trample 27,000 Square Feet of Blue Roses

By LINDA YABLONIKY

WHEN most people want to leave a building, they look for a door. Not Rudolf Stingel. For a year he came and went from home by climbing through a second-story window. Anyone could see a door, he reasoned. True, he was ill at the time, and the window was low. But now, at 46, with a stubbly salt-and-pepper beard and wavy brown hair that has begun to thin, Mr. Stingel can still call up that youthful strain of subversion.

Anyone else coming across a floral carpet, for example, would probably just see something to walk on. Mr. Stingel, who recently described himself as "caught between the rational and the poetic," sees a landscape painting. Starting this week, when his first work of public art in New York has its debut at Grand Central Terminal, 136,000 commuters a day will be able to view the world as he does, as an anonymous artwork masquerading as an everyday object that is transformed every time people walk on it.

Titled "Plan B" and installed for the month of July within the soaring Beaux-Arts marble climes of Vanderbilt Hall, the work consists of a 27,000-square-foot stretch of carpet covering the entire floor of the hall and woven with a pattern of bright blue roses on an even brighter pink ground. You could call it the carpet that ate Manhattan without exaggerating much.

Another part of "Plan B" is in Minneapolis, at the Walker Art Center, where Mr. Stingel rolled out a duplicate piece, which he calls a painting, on June 11. That version, which totals a mere 7,500 square feet, covers the lobby floor and extends onto an outdoor plaza, where it gobbles up the ground around a garden and a bicycle stand, stopping only when it reaches the street.

"It gives the place the kind of sinister familiarity you see in a Kubrick movie like 'The Shining,'" said Richard Flood, the Walker's chief curator. "It could have come from the Overlook Hotel."

In fact, Mr. Stingel's design came from Dutchan Patterned Carpet, a company that serves large hotels and casinos. After some experimentation, he altered the color scheme of pattern No. D-180 to suit his more psychedelic taste. "The 'Plan B' color is definitely off," he said. "It's almost obscene, it's so far off. And there's so much of it." Recalling his window-climbing phase, he added, "I always had a problem with boundaries."

Clearly part of the allure of Mr. Stingel's art is its biting humor, its challenge to ideas that have acquired outside stature in our culture. Yet he insists: "My

carpets are paintings. Not carpets."

Mr. Stingel considers himself primarily a painter. Indeed, he is currently preparing a group of new canvases for a September exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, a London gallery. If they have the look of gold damask wallpaper, it is because "artists have always been accused of being decorators, so I just went to the extreme and painted the wallpaper," he said. "Now it's pure decoration." Then, again, he added, "I always had a problem with paintings."

Such problems have had their rewards for Mr. Stingel, who dates their onset to his upbringing in Merano, Italy, a Tyrolean town steeped in what he terms "German Romanticism and angst." He knew nothing of contemporary art, he said, until he left high school for Vienna, making his way as a traditional portrait painter and doing well enough to win a commission from the Italian ambassador to Austria. There he came across a museum show of American photo realists and quickly traded his Renaissance-era technique for this new approach to painting. That took him to Milan, in 1980, when he decided he was more Neo-Expressionist than realist and began piling thick layers of paint on canvas to produce what he stresses today as "mass."

By 1987, when he reached New York (following a girlfriend), he was still seeking a painting style that would satisfy the social-revolutionary philosophy he adopted in his formative years, when Minimalism was hitting its peak. "I wanted to be against a certain way of thinking about art," he said, "to question its ability to inspire awe."

HE came up with a method that called for painting a large canvas a single color and laying a piece of weddingveil tulle over it, then spraying the whole with silver paint. Removing the tulle left lyrical, and painterly, creases on a luminous field of color. The silver, as Andy Warhol had earlier discovered, added a touch of glamour. "Silver makes everything look contemporary," Mr. Stingel said. "If you paint something silver, it looks, I don't know, from today."

After being asked, time and again, what his work was about, he revealed his technique, which he still employs, in "Instructions," an illustrated, step-by-step guide that he printed in six languages. In theory, Mr. Stingel believed, anyone following his "recipe" could make one of his paintings. Since then, he has embraced all sorts of nontraditional strategies and materials. "What was the cheapest thing I could use and still make it beautiful?" he asked. "Or take out of context and make amazing?" The answer came with his first solo show in New York, in 1991, when he carpeted an entire

Continued on Page D8



Rudolf Stingel stands on "Plan B" at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Its much larger companion piece, using the same carpet pattern, will be on view at Grand Central Terminal in New York.

Linda Yablonsky is a novelist and art critic and the program director of WFSB Web radio.