

The BAY AREA REPORTER

"Milk-inspired neon artwork lights up San Francisco airport terminal"

By Matthew S. Bajko

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People wait outside the Harvey Milk Terminal 1 at San Francisco International Airport beneath a neon piece of artwork with one of his quotes.

Photo: Matthew S. Bajko

The arrivals level curbside area of Harvey Milk Terminal 1 at San Francisco International Airport is now aglow in neon lights. Greeting passengers as they exit the aviation facility is roughly 8,000 square feet of signs ablaze above them.

Comprising 48 neon signs modeled after the marquee of the historic Castro Theatre, the artwork zig-zags along the overhang for the outdoor area and runs the course of the terminal. At its first entrance, Door 1, is a small marquee with Milk's famous quote, "You gotta give them hope," in white neon lights shining down from above.

It is one of nine Milk quotes artist Andrea Bowers selected for her installation attached to the

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underside of the canopy outside of the terminal's arrivals area. Another states, "All human beings have power. You are just one person, but you have power."

Lite Brite Neon Studio, an LGBTQ and artists of color collective in Kingston, New York, produced the neon pieces for Bowers. They were purposefully shipped to San Francisco this past May 22, which is Milk's birthday and celebrated as an unofficial state holiday in California.

In an Instagram post that day with photos of the artwork being prepared for transport to the West Coast, Bowers wrote, "Happy birthday to Harvey Milk! It's so rewarding to finally have the work ship for an almost 8-year-long project at SFO."

Over the summer the neon artwork was installed, along with 19 mirror balls. One final step is to activate the orbs, which have lights aimed at them to make them sparkle, so that they rotate. The switch to do so is set to be turned on this month.

"They bring so much joy," said SFO Museum Director and Chief Curator Jennifer McCabe of the decorations more commonly found adorning dance floors and not an exit area of an airport. "It is also unusual to see an artwork in this location, which I love."

Bowers, whose neon artwork has lit up cities, museums, and galleries across the globe, won the \$1.1 million commission for the Milk terminal's underpass lighting art project in 2019. Initially expected to debut three years ago, its installation was delayed by the prolonged construction timeline for the remodel of the terminal.

The Bay Area Reporter was unable to reach Bowers for comment about it now being in place. During a 2020 interview, she told the B.A.R. that Milk "is such an important part of San Francisco history. I was so excited to find out about this opportunity to apply for this public artwork at the Harvey Milk Terminal. That was just an obvious, amazing subject matter for me. I wanted to focus on his life's work, and the joy and hope in his work."

Milk's winning a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in November 1977 marked the first time that an out gay candidate had won election to public office in both San Francisco and California. His district included the LGBTQ Castro neighborhood and its historic movie palace that Bowers drew inspiration from and reopened earlier this year after an extensive remodel overseen by its new operator, Another Planet Entertainment, to allow for more live performances and music concerts.

Tragically, Milk was assassinated 11 months into his first term the morning of November 27, 1978 along with then-mayor George Moscone. In 2018, city officials agreed to name Terminal 1 at SFO after Milk, five years after gay former supervisor David Campos had initially floated a proposal to name the entire airport after the gay icon. A compromise was reached to instead select one of

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the airport's four terminals, thus making Milk the first LGBTQ icon to have an airport terminal named in their honor.



Disco balls are included in the neon artwork outside Harvey Milk Terminal 1 at San Francisco International Airport. Photo: Matthew S. Bajko

Art inspired by Milk

Amid the protracted bureaucratic wrangling over the airport naming details, focus at one point turned to the public artwork planned as part of the \$2.5 billion remodel of the Milk terminal. Former District 9 supervisor Hillary Ronen, a legislative aide to Campos who succeeded him in office, had pressed to see that at least some of the art was inspired by Milk.

The first debuted in the departures area for the terminal in a space called the Central Inglenook near the American Airlines check-in counters. The photographic exhibit created by the SFO Museum traces Milk's life from his childhood in New York to his days as a pioneering political operative in San Francisco during the 1970s.

More recently a Milk-themed mural created by transgender and queer San Francisco-based artist Craig Calderwood was unveiled in 2024. It surrounds a three-story atrium in the terminal's pre-security arrivals level with escalators to the baggage claim area and ground transportation

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below.

Bowers' artwork is already having an impact, said McCabe, a straight ally and mother of a transgender teenager who moved back to the Bay Area two years ago after being hired to oversee the airport's museum.

"When I visit it during the day, I see people stopped underneath, looking up and reading the quotes, which is kind of awesome to see," said McCabe. "I think it is incredible."

Airport and city officials are to host a private reception and ribbon-cutting for the neon artwork in early October, at the start of LGBTQ History Month. Bowers, a straight ally based in Los Angeles, is expected to attend.

She grew up in Ohio and recalled hearing on the news as a teenager about the deaths of Milk and Moscone when she spoke to the B.A.R. six years ago. Finding hope from the tragedy and light in darkness is imbued into the concept of her SFO art installation, particularly with its location at the Milk terminal.

"There is nothing more depressing sometimes than waiting at the arrivals section for someone to pick you up or to get a car. You feel kind of lost," Bowers had noted. "Also, this is your first glimpse of the city. I love the idea your first glimpse will be quotes from Harvey Milk surrounded by all this beautiful neon with disco balls."

A frequent visitor to San Francisco, Bowers' terminal proposal was partly sparked by her finding a photo of Milk standing on the sidewalk and pointing up at the Castro Theatre marquee. It's a block away from where he operated his camera store at 575 Castro Street that doubled as the headquarters for his political campaigns.

The disco balls she included harken to Milk's friendship with the late gay disco star Sylvester, a fellow Castro resident featured in the Oscar-winning biopic "Milk" during a birthday party scene serenading the civil rights leader. They symbolize for Bowers both the gay nightclub scene and political activism of the 1970s.

"In thinking about all of the gay clubs and theater sites back then they all had disco balls in them. They were not only being part of the culture coming together for the LGBTQ community but also sites of activism," she had told the B.A.R. "It just seemed to me kind of the Castro Theatre's neon lighting seems to be an icon of that history. Their programming historically has supported that community, and Harvey's office was in that neighborhood and was the neighborhood he represented."

For more information about Bowers' "We've Got to Give Them Hope 2026" installation and other holdings in the SFO Museum collection, visit the landing page for the neon artwork on the airport's website.

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