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The Extraordinary, Glimpsed in the Ordinary Neil Goldberg Exhibition at Museum of the City of New York

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Neil Goldberg's video "Wind Tunnel" shows subway riders being hit with a blast of air from approaching trains. Courtesy of the artist.

These are not the parts of New York City that fire the imagination: salad bars, subway entrances, roll-down security gates, the stairs of the M15 bus, open truck windows from which drivers' thick elbows hang like Sunday hams.

Such pieces of urban architecture and visual life are more like what the scientists Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin called spandrels, a term borrowed from architecture, where it refers to the inevitable V-shaped expanses between rounded arches. In evolutionary theory spandrels are biological features that exist simply as a kind of byproduct of the way organisms develop. In the city you could think of spandrels as all of the pedestrian things between and among the things — the Chrysler Building, Coney Island, "Juan de Pareja," the perfect pizza — that everyone celebrates.

For years now the artist Neil Goldberg has focused his gaze and camera intently on this interstitial other, the corners of experience "we all seem to have agreed are not worth paying attention to," he said the other day in his small studio on Canal Street, on a block of laundries and cash-for-gold jewelry stores where he has worked since the early 1990s.

"Stories the City Tells Itself," a tender, moving and sad but also deeply funny collection of this work in video and photographs opens on Friday at the Museum of the City of New York, the institution's first foray into contemporary video art. And if you've spent any time in New York, to see it is a bit like rummaging around in the parts of your memory that habit elides day by day.

Store owners performing the hopeful morning ritual of rattling up their security gates. Elderly people hauling themselves, step by Sisyphean step, onto the bus. Commuters confronting the trivially tragic — but tragic nonetheless — instant when the subway doors close too quickly, severing them from the fortunate ones who made it inside. Office workers staring down existentially through the sneeze-guard glass, pondering the consequential inconsequential lunchtime question: Salad again? Maybe the macaroni and cheese today.

"I think there's something reflected in people's eyes about how pivotal that decision really is," Mr. Goldberg said. "They look both vulnerable but also kind of savage."

As a teenager, Mr. Goldberg, 48, who grew up in Hicksville and Jericho on Long Island, would come into the city for things like anti-nukes rallies.

Once he moved to New York, he said, he never quite got over the elation "that this is the place where I actually get to go to sleep every night."

Even his earliest work — frankly emotional but never sentimental — is shot through with that enchantment and also with an acute awareness of mortality shaped by the death of an older brother from cystic fibrosis. The short, tightly edited slow-motion videos from 1995 and 1996 of old men and women ascending the bus stairs formed part of a larger body of work called "Hallelujah Anyway," a title he borrowed from a collection of Kenneth Patchen poems and adopted as a kind of artistic mission statement.

"It was about thinking about how the conditions of life are so radically imperfect," Mr. Goldberg said. "We're all going to die, and saying 'hallelujah anyway' doesn't lose track of it. It's not a Cassandra thing or the best of all possible worlds. It doesn't look away from the pain, but it says, 'Well, this is what we have, so what do we do with it?'"

I first met Mr. Goldberg 10 years ago, when I followed him into the subway to watch him try to collect distilled disappointment on video as people missed the train: an experience that came, he had always noticed, with a kind of revelatory lowering and rapid reinstatement of the impassive social mask urban dwellers wear.

The subway has always been oddly calming for him, he said, a place where most decisions are made by others "and your only choices are uptown or downtown, express or local." He has returned there often as an artist, sometimes surreptitiously and sometimes as a kind of director of happenstance, posing friends and strangers with hair dancing in a Pre-Raphaelite subway-wind swirl. To this day Mr. Goldberg is the only person I've ever met who frames the subway in terms of a Buddhist dictum: "The path is easy for those without preferences." At times he has even forced himself to follow the idea in his work. When outdoor video projects were interrupted by rain, he would usually pack up his camera to go home. But he began to think about the parts of life he was missing when weather dictated the terms. So for several years during rain storms, he simply wrapped the camera in plastic and hung it from a traffic pole or a tree branch, letting the wind decide where it would point.

The resulting videos, in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, might seem at first like conceptual exercises or blurred Gerhard Richter paintings set in motion, but they come to convey the almost palpable feeling of a city that has achieved self-consciousness.

"It's not the monumental or the heroic city that he's showing, but it's the city where we live," said Sarah Henry, chief curator of the Museum of the City of New York. "To me, it's always been that interplay of the ordinary and the extraordinary in New York that seems to give it its power."

For almost two years after the death of his father in 2007, Mr. Goldberg stopped making art. One of the pieces he has worked on since resuming his career is a series of large-scale, color-saturated photographs looking up out of the subway stairs into tree limbs and sky, scenes that resemble trapezoidal stained-glass windows.

"The moment of emerging from the subway is always sort of like waking up," he said about his motivation, "like coming back into your life."

That life might be messy, but as all art — whether it intends to or not — seems to say: hallelujah anyway.