

Houstonia.

FLY HIGH

Houston Has the Best Airport Arts Program in the World. Here's Why.

Both Hobby and Bush have won top global awards for how they bring the arts to travelers with the Artist in Residency program.

By [Meredith Nudo](#) • November 8, 2024



Houston Airports artist in residence and art ambassador Brian Zievert used to work in the film industry, and would paint sets during his downtime.

IMAGE: COURTESY OF HOUSTON AIRPORTS

LIMINAL SPACES permeate day-to-day existence, though their very nature leaves us little time—and, oftentimes, interest—to [contemplate](#) them. In many ways, we don't even view them as complete spaces in and of themselves, but rather an inevitable banality, the connecting point between where we've been and where we're [headed](#). A temporary holding cell to roll our eyes, fidget in our chairs, and sigh if our wait extends past its intended time.

Where we see the mundanities of reality, Alton DuLaney sees a blank canvas full of exciting and ever-shifting creative visions. As the director of cultural arts and

curator of public art for Houston Airports, he considers the “in between” places—such as the airport—an opportunity to inspire harried travelers to stop every once in a while and appreciate the arts.

“I love everything about the airport, even before I worked here. I love travel. I love luggage. I love flight attendants, the look of people in uniforms. I love airplanes. I love the whole science of aviation. And I love art,” DuLaney says. “So when I was offered this job... I was like, This is a dream come true.”

In 2022, at a time when air [travel](#) was still restricted because of the COVID-19 pandemic, DuLaney and then–chief terminal management officer Liliana Rambo created the Airport Artist in Residence program. He refers to the initiative as “the longest continuously running artist in residence program” at an airport, owing to its forebears in other cities shutting down for the sake of public health. [Pittsburgh](#), however, has since reopened.

AIR, as the program is (fittingly) abbreviated, brings artists to both George Bush Intercontinental (IAH) and Hobby airports for three-month stints. They station themselves at a public studio located in their assigned terminals and get to work. There, travelers arriving at or leaving Houston can slow down to enjoy watching the artists create in their favorite media, be it paint or textiles or sculpture or something else entirely. After the residency wraps up, the finished pieces are added to the airport’s permanent collection to make commutes more entertaining to passersby.

DuLaney mentions that the whole idea began when painter Daniel Anguilo—the talent behind the legendary [Greetings from Houston](#) mural in the Heights—joked about having to finish his own work at the airports either early in the morning or at night. Too many curious visitors would stop and speak to him about his projects.

“We realized that there was a real interest in passengers to see artists at work and interact with the artist,” DuLaney says.

To take part in the AIR program, artists must first be nominated by their peers, usually their fellow creatives who’ve already held a residency at the airport. From there, they undergo an interview process to determine whether they meet the criteria.

“[The AIR program] not only requires someone who does something that is visually interesting to watch, but also someone that’s good with people. There’s a lot of engaging with passengers, talking to our guests about what the artist is doing, etc.,” DuLaney says. “In the art world, we get a lot of chances to visit studios and galleries and museums, but a lot of people never have that opportunity to see an artist at [work](#). It’s a really rare treat.”

A self-described “ham with a paintbrush,” AIR resident Brian Zievert also serves as the airport’s art ambassador. He’s spent the past two years painting in both IAH and Hobby terminals, and was recently assigned to set up shop at Ellington Field during an air show. The social aspect is one of his favorite parts of the job, and he’s made friends with nearby restaurant workers, TSA agents, and pilots. Some travelers have even become repeat visitors.

“I love it. I think it’s the best thing since sliced bread,” Zievert says. “I really enjoy hanging out at the airport. I’m not much of a traveler. I’m kind of a homebody, but I love driving down there... I got the best of that deal. I don’t have to be on that plane.”

His fellow residents Miller Quevedo and Suzette Schutze, who earlier this year worked at IAH and Hobby respectively, both found speaking with children and teens an incredibly fulfilling part of the job. They were able to teach and talk with aspiring future artists in a low-pressure environment.

“It’s a good experience for kids, because the kids enjoy it,” Quevedo says. “But normally, the fathers pull their arms and say, ‘Don’t touch. Don’t get close.’ But for them, my art was nice because they can interact.”



Miller Quevedo at work.

IMAGE: COURTESY OF HOUSTON AIRPORTS

In Schutze’s case, she considered the back-and-forth between herself and the up-and-coming young creatives a chance to serve as both a mentor and a student in and of herself. She found that discussing her processes with curious visitors helped her better understand other artistic philosophies and [approaches](#).

“These kids have access to these technologies that I think can really develop them as future artists,” she says. “That was a learning experience for me as to what some of those guys do and how they create things.”

In addition, she views her residency as a way to inspire those who stopped by her booth to seek out their own visual voices. Both kids and adults would muse on how they themselves would like to pursue the arts, and took advantage of the opportunity to ask Schutze questions about getting started.

“Anybody can be an artist. You just have to pick up your crayons or your paints, or whatever it is you work with, and just create something,” she says. “That might lead to the next step to create something else.”

Getting some much-needed socialization outside the confines of a studio benefits artist and traveler alike, but that isn’t the only advantage to participating in the

AIR program. According to DuLaney, the Houston airports will service around 65 million travelers in 2024. That’s a lot of eyes on the artists.

“The largest [museum](#) in Houston gets about a million visitors in the entire year. So for an artist to be in an airport collection, for an artist to show their art at the Houston airport, the exposure is really unparalleled,” DuLaney says. He goes on to note that the most highly traveled-to museum in the world, the Louvre, brings in roughly seven million visitors annually (in 2023, that number was [8.9 million](#)). Not even a prized position inside the legendary glass pyramid would net the potential audience artists could reach at the airport.

In addition to the AIR program, other local arts organizations are able to take advantage of these staggering audience numbers. The Orange Show for Visionary Art and Sawyer Yards have both partnered with the airport for exhibitions, and the Harmony in the Air program has brought in over 75 local musicians representing a wide range of genres to perform in the terminals. It’s some of the best possible exposure the city has to offer.



Houston Airports’ collaboration with the Orange Show showcased many of Houston’s famous art cars.

IMAGE: COURTESY OF HOUSTON AIRPORTS

“Out of these millions of passengers, these hundreds of thousands of passengers that pass through the airport every day, a large percentage, probably half of these, are connecting passengers... Their only experience of Houston, Texas, is what they experience within the airport,” DuLaney says. “They’re not going to have time to go to the Museum of Fine Arts, or the Menil Collection, or the Contemporary Arts Museum, or any of the other terrific art institutions and galleries that we have here.”

This commitment to showcasing just how much creative talent calls Houston home has earned the airports two coveted international awards. [Skytrax](#), one of the world’s foremost ratings organizations dedicated to the aviation sector, created the Best Art in the Airport in 2023 and awarded it to Houston for its efforts at both Hobby and IAH.

But exposure to the arts isn’t only for the artists’ sake. Airports can be lonely places, especially for those who frequently travel solo. Being able to stop for a moment and connect with someone during the act of creation, someone for whom a little company is actively welcomed since they’re in no hurry, not fuzzy and disoriented from the myriad travel-related stressors—it’s one way for the liminal to feel just a little less in-betweeny.

The possibility, if not probability, of never seeing the artists again can help with overcoming the awkwardness of an initial socialization approach. There’s a vulnerability and honesty in these suspended states between destinations that facilitate conversation, making the journey in between its own unique space for self-discovery and seeking personal connection, however ephemeral.

“A very, very old lady was feeling very wonderful, and she told me, ‘Oh, my God, this made my day,’” Quevedo says of one of his most memorable experiences in the AIR program. “And she spent 30 minutes talking and talking.”