

# VIEW from the Hill



Courtesy of Margie Hughto

*Golden Threads* (2002) by Margie Hughto is a triptych with 40- by 19-inch panels featuring colored clays, slips, glazes, and inlaid items.

## Lasting Impressions

Margie Hughto likes to get her hands into her work. Inside her studio, you might find Hughto up to her elbows in a batch of paper pulp, shaping 200 pounds of wet clay, pressing handmade paper with a visiting artist, firing up a kiln, or working with her student assistants on a large public art project. “I love mushy materials like paper pulp and clay,” says Hughto, a ceramics professor who has taught in the College of Visual and Performing Arts for more than 30 years. “I’m really physical with my work.”

As an internationally recognized artist, Hughto is known for her richly textured and colorful ceramic wall reliefs and paintings, and ceramic tile murals, which she added to her repertoire in 1995. “I like collaging, putting together things with lots of parts,” she says. “I work totally intuitively and like to just let things happen. It’s like having a pile of toys to piece together.”

Hughto’s creations are built for the long haul, too. As evidence, look at *Seasons*, her large-scale ceramic painting that has adorned a Buffalo subway stop since 1985 and is “as beautiful today as the first day it went in,” she says. Then there’s *Trade, Treasure, and Travel*, a panorama of 12 interconnected ceramic murals that range up to 30 feet in length and feature such images as ships, keys, coins, and even a bear and a bull. The piece, commissioned by New York City’s Metropolitan Transit Authority, was installed in 1998 at the Cortlandt Street subway station, two levels beneath the World Trade Center. “After September 11th, I didn’t know for months if it was OK,” Hughto says. “When I finally got a look at it, it was like going into King Tut’s tomb. There was all this art—and not a scratch on it.” That, she likes to say, is “the power of ceramics.”

Hughto is captivated by the immediacy and fluidity of working with clay and the way it transforms in a kiln and interacts with glazes. “You can move clay around, press it, and play with it,” she says. “If you don’t like what you’ve done, you can do it again.” Hughto draws inspiration from clay’s connection to ancient civilizations and the natural world, and often incorporates these themes into her art. She likes to embed materials or make impressions in clay, using everything from wisteria, fern, and oak leaves to fossils, gems, minerals, and heavy metals. She roams antique shops in search of objects that catch her fancy and keeps an eclectic collection of items in her home studio for research or future projects. “I’ve really taken to buying rocks these days,” Hughto says. “I go to all these gem and mineral shows and come home with boxes of rocks.”

And whether she is grappling with a commissioned site-specific piece or experimenting with glaze colors for an exhibition work, her art remains very much in the public eye. She recently fabricated a coral reef and elements of the Earth and moon for part of an expansive mural of the solar system at the Natural History Museum subway station at 81st Street in Manhattan, and produced an Egyptian-themed entrance to the Blodgett Elementary School library in Syracuse. She was also one of 40 artists selected to contribute to *Visionary Ceramics*, a show that will open in 2004 at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Yet, even with all her success and knowledge, Hughto admits clay and glazes still hold a sense of mystery for her. “No matter how long you’ve been in this business,” she says, “when you open a kiln, you’re never sure what’s in there.”

—Jay Cox