

Philly-centric art in the new Comcast Tech Center seeks to connect its sky-high offices with the streets below

by [Ellie Rushing](#), Updated: August 8, 2019



JESSICA GRIFFIN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

With a soft smile and a tilted head, a bodybuilder in her 20s who lives with deafness relays the phrase “I love you” in sign language. Her photo is broken up into four closeups of her face, revealing a cascade of emotions that span the walls of the 21st floor of the Comcast Technology Center.

On the next wall over, another photo captures the bright smile of a veteran in his mid-40s, who lost his leg during his third tour in Afghanistan. He wears the same scarf around his neck that he and his comrades wore in battle.

These images feature just two of the dozens of subjects captured by Philadelphia-based photographer Karen Harmelin and Jaime Salm, creative director of MIO Design Studio. The pair spent five days photographing various Philadelphia actors, from ages 8 to 80. One sings, another laughs, a third points off camera, all building a “wheel of micro emotions,” the tiny transitional facial expressions that occur as briefly as 1/25th of a second.

“You experience every one of these emotions. It takes you through that whole spectrum all at once and on a grand scale,” said Harmelin.



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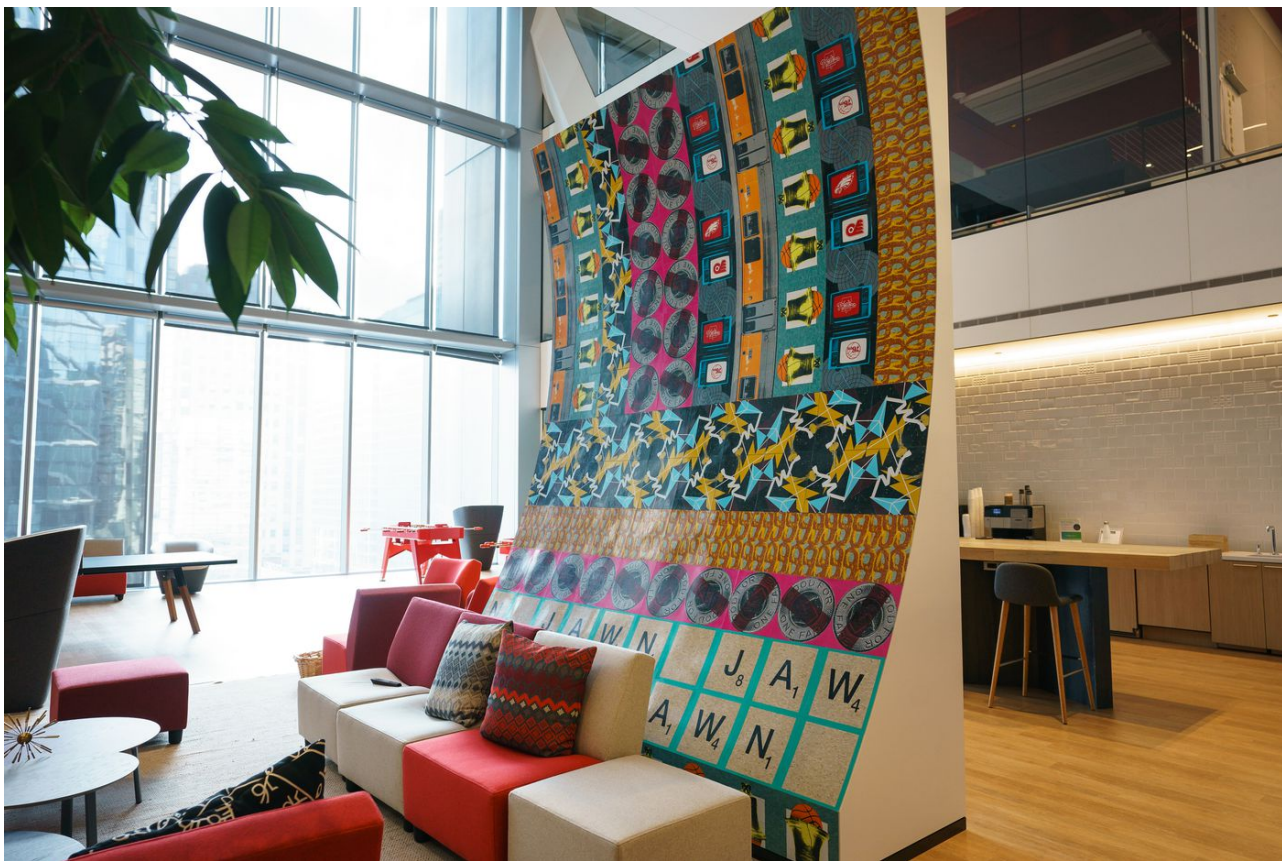
"Emotional Gradient" by Jaime Salm (MIO) & Karen Harmelin combines glass, laminated plywood, and digitally printed film. This photo shows a female body builder who is deaf signing "I love you."

She and Salm are two of the 40 local artists telling stories on the walls and halls of the Comcast Technology Center, the company's \$1.5 billion headquarters that is finally opening its Four Seasons Hotel to the public on Monday. Their photographs are more vivid and personal than what you might expect to find decorating a 60-story skyscraper of a \$188 billion corporation. Also surprising are the dozens of hand-painted murals, towering abstract sculptures, and hand-crafted furniture.

Art is strategically embedded in Philadelphia's tallest building to spur reflection, creativity, and sometimes a sense of play. The colorful contemporary pieces seek to connect workers to their workplace, ultimately making them more productive and engaged with team members.

As soon as any of the 4,000 employees enter the technology center, they're greeted by work from internationally known artists, such as a massive cast-iron and mirrored tetrahedron created by British artist [Conrad Shawcross](#), known for mechanical creations that skim the realms of geometry, philosophy, and physics.

But it's the local art in the floors above that seeks to evoke the streets below. Comcast's massive collection challenges the traditional straight-edge notions of corporate art and looks to reconnect its employees with their city, said Claudia Vick, partner of [Vick Art Advisors](#), a New York City-based art advisory firm, who helped select and coordinate each installation.



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The "Philadelphia Circuit Ramp" by Leslie Friedman sits in the common space of the sixth floor. Incorporating local art into the building can boost morale of employees and reconnect them with the city.

It's not uncommon for large corporations to invest in local art, said Rebecca O'Leary, a [Philadelphia-based art consultant](#) who specializes in corporate installations.

Comcast did not release the amount that it spent on the artwork, but O'Leary said that an effort of this magnitude probably cost more than \$10 million, including funds for the artwork, advisers, and installers.

The public can see the large sculptures in the entrance of the center, but there is no public access to the local art inside. Still, the company hopes to offer public tours beginning in early 2020.

Vick worked alongside folks from the New York interior design firm [Gensler](#) to create a theme for each floor, or sets of floors, and their common spaces. Then they researched artists who could build or install a piece that fit the concept.



This graffiti collage of various Philly words was freehanded by Jimmy of Glossblack LLC. He has various murals around the city, including on the Walt Whitman Bridge and for the 76ers.

Vick would then connect with the artists and ask them to submit a portfolio. If they were selected, the process became a conversation. Designs, colors, and layout went through multiple approvals from both Comcast and the artist.

Once all sides agreed, the installation was timed to the completion of each floor. By the end, it brought Philadelphia's artistic community together in one vertical cityscape.

That space could look like the sea of hundreds of iconic Philly words, such as "Fishtown," "Whiz wit," and "hoagies," spray-painted onto the walls of floors 29, 30, and 31. The creator, who goes by the name [Jimmy of Glossblack LLC](#), is a Philly guy who was born here and uses his freehanded trademark graffiti to bring street art into the office.

But the space can also be as complex as the murals six floors up, where "Open Access" assembles multi-colored polygons to oppose homogeneity. The large human figures that span across floors 36, 37, and 38 may look similar, but each is unique. The artist, [Odili Donald Odita](#), wanted this to represent Comcast's employees.



JESSICA GRIFFIN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

"Open Access" by Odili Donald Odita, challenges homogeneity and looks to represent the diverse people of Comcast coming together in the workplace.

"I don't think people are just homogeneous," said Odita, who was born in Nigeria but now lives in Conshohocken and teaches at Temple University's Tyler School of Art and Architecture. "And these differences create a corporation."

It took Odita more than four months to decide on the shapes, layout, and colors. Then an additional four to six weeks for four assistants and him to complete the painting.

"How you can identify these figures ... how you see them dressed differently or existing differently is to understand the concept of uniqueness," not only at Comcast but among the city's artists.

"People used to think you had to go to New York to experience art," Odita said, "but Philadelphia has so much wealth of culture and so much wealth of cultural information that this project tapped into."