

# LAWEEKLY®

JULY 11-17, 2025 | VOL. 47 / NO. 36 | LAWEEKLY.COM



Comedy Q&A:  
**JOEL KIM  
BOOSTER**

BY MARK STEFANOS

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# LA WEEKLY

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## LA WEEKLY CLASSIFIEDS

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## ENTERTAINMENT

# DIRECTOR NATASHA KERMANI AND AUTHOR JOE HILL ENTER THE DRACULA-VERSE WITH ‘ABRAHAM’S BOYS’

BY KALYN CORRIGAN



A behind-the-scenes shot from “Abraham’s Boys”

COURTESY GABRIEL DE URIOSTE

**A**braham’s Boys, Natasha Kermani’s clever retelling of the classic *Dracula* tale, burns itself into the brain by way of bold narrative choices and Southern Gothic aesthetics. Based on a short story in author Joe Hill’s first published book, *20th Century Ghosts*, the film opens in 1915’s Central Valley, California, a purposefully remote location where Abraham Van Helsing (Titus Welliver) has moved his two boys Maximilian (Brady Hepner) and Rudolph (Judah Mackey) in the hopes of outrunning their colorful past. Little do they know, the greatest threat facing this family already resides within the walls of their quaint new home.

“From the beginning, I’ve always looked at Van Helsing a little bit sidelong,” author Hill tells me about the inception of his original story. “I read a book in about 1983 called *The Dracula Tapes* by Fred Saberhagen, which tells the story from

Dracula’s point of view, and it becomes clear that Van Helsing is a religious fanatic. He’s a crook who doesn’t understand vampires, doesn’t understand science, and leads a whole bunch of gullible Victorians on a murderous rampage. And then a couple years later, I read Stoker’s *Dracula* for the first time. When I read it, I thought, “This is all wrong. Lies and propaganda!”

Feeling the spark of injustice, the author was inspired to recount his own interpretation of the text. Much in the same way that John Gardner’s 1971 novel *Grendel* serves as a rebuttal to the epic poem *Beowulf*, so, too, did Hill seek to strike his own stake in the popular vampire lore.

“This is a guy who spends his Friday night creeping around a cemetery, peeling off the lids off new coffins and hammering stakes through the heart of the

young lady at rest there, then chopping off her head and stuffing a garlic bulb into her screaming mouth,” Hill says about the character of Van Helsing. “We know he’s a hero, because he told us so. We know vampires are bad. We heard it right from him. They’re infected and evil and have to be destroyed. Okay. But his Friday night sounds an awful lot like Ted Bundy’s Friday night.”

The author’s observations coalesce in a riveting tale of an overbearing father with paranoid ideations and questionable ethics. Van Helsing’s sons Max and Rudy are kept stashed away from the world in an isolated farmhouse nestled deep within the country, along with their ailing mother Mina, played by the transformative Jocelyn Donahue. Sequestered in an environment that abides by a strict moral code, the brothers are homeschooled, there’s no playing outside after sundown,

and when Van Helsing delivers an order, it is to be carried out without question — no matter how ghastly the request.

“Bram Stoker doesn’t give us a biography for Van Helsing,” points out director Kermani. While rereading *Dracula* to prepare for her latest project, she was surprised to discover just how much she questioned the iconic hero’s virtue. “The main characters are frightened and confused. Something is attacking them and they don’t fully understand it, and in comes Van Helsing, this patriarchal figure who basically says, ‘I have the answers,’ right? ‘I will show you the monsters, and I will show you how to defeat them,’ and these young people fall right in line. They get behind him and they do really extreme things, including killing one of their own friends, because Abraham says, ‘Cut off her head, she’s a monster.’”

By approaching the original Stoker story from a different angle, Kermani developed a similar outlook on Van Helsing’s erratic behavior as the formidable *Boys* author. Yet despite this new insight, the filmmaker still finds it amusing how such a somber take on the classic subject matter could spill out of a man who genuinely radiates warmth and compassion.

“It’s so interesting, because Joe himself is such a joyful guy,” says Kermani about Hill. “There’s a real lightness to him, and he’s a joy to be around. But I’ve always felt his work is so dark because what he’s really tapping into is the dreadful aspects of our human selves. He writes these monster stories, but really, it’s so personal, it’s so intimate, and it’s so inescapable in that way, because it’s people grappling with the gross, nasty parts of themselves.”

Known for her fascinating character studies and strikingly surreal worldbuilding in standouts like *Lucky*, *Imitation Girl* and *V/H/S/85*, when Kermani came on board to adapt Hill’s story, the author instantly got the sense that she was a filmmaker whom he could trust. Praising the director’s work as “stunning” and “extraordinary,” Hill goes on to say that she’s the kind of filmmaker with whom you meet and you “come away inspired,” adding that everyone who talks to her “starts to latch on to her combination of imagination, competence and clarity of vision. You just know she’s three pictures away from being asked to do a Marvel movie.”

Dripping with suspense, weaponizing empty spaces and wielding dark shadows like weapons, even author Hill believes Kermani’s movie plays like an Alfred Hitchcock film: “With the whole way it’s shot and constructed and the way scenes of suspense are engineered, it feels like *Psycho* or *Vertigo*.” By prioritizing suspense over scares and pushing claustrophobic environments to trigger pressure cooker scenarios, Kermani builds the tension in such a strategic manner, the



Director Natasha Kermani on set.

late filmmaker would be proud.

“Van Helsing’s house out there on that hill in the middle of rattlesnake country could be the Bates Motel,” says Hill, his eyes shining. “But then, during the day, when we’re outside and Brady Hepner has his sleeves rolled up and he’s chopping wood, suddenly, it looks like a John Ford Western. The sunlight is pouring itself out across the California hills, and Brady could be a young Gregory Peck in some 1950s era film. I think that’s part of what makes it so satisfying and effective.”

Inadvertently capitalizing on one of Hitch’s lesser-known director traits, Kermani crafts a villain that is both deceptively charming and persuasive. Thanks in large part to a powerfully moving performance by Welliver as Van Helsing, his character, although morally ambiguous, remains sympathetic. With his full-bodied voice serving up fiery sermons like a preacher, and his projection of a steadfast family man masking his controlling tendencies, it’s not hard to understand why everyone around him tends to bend the knee.

When the vampire slayer presents an afflicted prisoner to his boys, declaring that this terrified person, whom he’s secretly trapped in his basement, is infected with

the same disease that controlled Count Dracula, older brother Max begins to question his father’s intentions. But Rudy, the baby of the family, still finds his old man plausible and appealing.

“I really love Abraham,” smiles Kermani. “He’s one of my favorite characters that I’ve been able to develop for the screen. He’s not a villain and he’s not a hero, which is the case for every human being. There is no true evil. There’s no true good. We’re all sort of somewhere in the middle.”

By expanding Van Helsing’s biography and creating memories from his childhood, including his relationship with his own father, Kermani conjures up relatable moments for viewers that seek to identify his core trauma. “He’s a physician,” she explains, “At the time, doctors were not upper-class citizens, they were very much members of the working class. I thought all of those little details were very interesting, and started to build a glimpse of who this guy is, and why he’s so scared all the time. What is this fear that he can’t seem to shake, that is so extreme that he brings his family to this place? That he develops this incredible mythology around himself — of course, with himself in the center as the hero — and he

builds this really complex story in order to help understand his own latent fears that he can’t seem to escape. I think he’s incredibly relatable. And I feel sorry for him, too.”

Author Joe Hill knows a thing or two about living up to one’s legacy. The son of acclaimed novelists Stephen King and Tabitha King, he describes how growing up, there was no question as to where his path might one day lead.

“It’s no secret that I have an extraordinary, one-of-a-kind American father,” says Hill. “I would come home from school and my mom would be in her office, and she had a tomato red IBM Selectric typewriter that shivered like it had palsy, and she’d be in there banging out pages. And I’d go up to my dad’s office, and he’d be sitting in front of his Wang Word processor with a black screen that had green letters on it, like the letters falling in *The Matrix*. You looked at that computer and it looked like the future. He’d be in there playing make-believe, cranking out pages. By the time I was 12 or 13, I just thought that’s what you were supposed to do with your day. I thought you get back from school, you make a cup of tea, and you sit in your room and you play make believe for a couple hours, and



eventually someone will pay you a whole lot of money for it — which it turned out to be true.”

As an aspiring writer, Hill wrestled with the idea that his work might be judged on a different scale than his peers. When you're raised by the man responsible for such titles as *Carrie*, *The Shining*, *The Dead Zone*, *It*, *The Stand* and *Misery*, it's not unreasonable to fear that following suit might mean being praised for his name, and not necessarily his merit.

“When I was in college, I started to think, if I write as Joseph King and people know about who my dad is, there's a chance that someone will publish me because they see a chance to make a quick buck in a famous last name, and regardless of quality,” remembers Hill. “But readers are pretty clever, and if you write something garbage and they read it and throw it down halfway through, they're never gonna buy a book by you again. They'll think, ‘He just got published because he's got a famous father!’ I had a terror of that happening, and I needed to know, for my own self-worth, that when I got published, it was for the right reasons.”

As a precaution, Hill chose to publish his writing under the pen name “Joe Hill,” a pseudonym made from his real full name, Joseph Hillstrom King (his parents are big Joan Baez fans). Even after successfully achieving recognition on his own terms, the renowned author still uses his old alias today, despite his cover being blown pretty much the moment fans met him in person.

“The big clue that my dad might be Stephen King was my face,” Hill laughs. “I sold *20th Century Ghosts*, out of which *Abraham's Boys* comes, to a small press in England after it had been turned down everywhere else. Then the book came out, and I did what you're supposed to do, which is you go out and try to sell the book. Right away, people started to suspect something was up. They looked

at my face and said, ‘Hey, wait a minute.’”

Just as the Van Helsing boys feel the weight of their father's expectations, so, too, was Hill born into a world of predetermined projections. Despite a loving home life, Hill knew his career trajectory would inevitably raise eyebrows in the literary world. Society loves to tout the positive aspects of nepotism, but few rarely discuss the pressure put upon young people to achieve towering standards set in place by authority figures who have garnered international influence. Still, the writer is the first to point out his privilege.

“I'm the luckiest guy I know,” Hill beams. “I've got a new book out in October, and one of the last things I wrote for it was an acknowledgments page. When I was working through my ‘thank yous’ at the end, I thanked my mom and dad for looking at an early draft of the manuscript and sharing their editorial thoughts with me. And then I stepped back and I thought, ‘Holy shit, I had Stephen King and Tabitha King read an early draft of this thing, and edit it page by page. Who has that? No one has that. What an amazing thing!’”

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, as Hill tends to explore family dynamics in a similar fashion to his kin. “One of my artistic preoccupations is the relationship between fathers and sons,” he says. “I always find myself looking at really unusual, extraordinary, one-of-a-kind men. And my question about them is never, ‘What would it be like to be him?’ My question is always, ‘What would it be like to be his son?’ I find myself always thinking that way. Certainly, when I looked at Abraham Van Helsing, and I was trying to find my way into the story, I thought, ‘What would it be like to be his kid?’ The conclusion I came to is, ‘Not too nice.’”

There's a moment towards the end of the original short story where Max catches himself mimicking his father's violence in real time. As Hill's text reads, “He saw



COURTESY GABRIEL DE URIOSTE

now he had always had it in him: his father's brusque willingness to puncture flesh and toil in blood. He saw it clear, and with a kind of dismay.” An unflinching portrayal of bloodlines, the theme of cursed inheritance permeates much of Kermani's adaptation.

“Even though Max does experience this coming of age, he's still not quite able to escape the teachings of his father,” reflects Kermani. “He's still behaving in accordance with Abraham's tenets, which is: identify and destroy the monster, protect your loved ones and yourself.” Addressing the film's looming sense of grim fate, she wonders, “Are we just doomed to follow in our parents' footsteps? I don't know the answer, but I know that it's not an easy yes or no.”

One of the most startling departures Hill makes from Stoker's source material is the addition of Mina as Van Helsing's late wife. Unabashedly leaping into unknown territory, Hill's decision to romanticize the relationship between Mina and Abraham cheekily teeters on the edge of forbidden love. Taking that notion one step further, director Kermani ups the ante by making Mina a constant presence in the movie, rather than a fading memory.

“I was fascinated by Joe's decision to put Nina and Abraham together,” muses director Kermani. “To me, that was so wild, because Nina is so much with Jonathan Harker in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. What would drive Mina into Abraham's arms? And away from her home, and cause her to leave behind her entire life?” Upon revisiting the 19th-century novel, the filmmaker discovered that Mina's character might actually be the most pivotal. “Mina's the one who's targeted by *Dracula*. She's the one who's bitten by him. She's the one who has this telepathic connection with him. And it's Mina and Abraham who go off together in the end, and have their little adventure.”

Kermani believes Hill was instinctively

tapping into something buried deep within the original text, and found herself thrilled at the chance to pull on those threads and discover who this woman might be nearly two decades later: “She has these open wounds from these events in 1897 that she's never been able to fully heal. They've just been festering for 18 years while she's been living this solitary life with this strange man. That felt so juicy. Just a great sandbox for a character to be developed in.”

Once Donahue came on board to play Mina, the character truly became real. “She was straight out of an Edgar Allan Poe poem,” says Kermani, “Beautiful and porcelain, and really representative of the old world, because the film is so much in California. Especially with the kids, to have Mina as this through line back to *Dracula*, I think really deepened the world.”

As studios struggle to interpret what it is precisely that audiences are craving, director Kermani argues that more often than not, companies are learning the wrong lessons from box office results. Although original stories are necessary and essential, perhaps now more than ever, it is crucial to learn the lessons of the past.

“There is this instinct in Hollywood to reinvent the wheel — and I don't know about that,” ponders Kermani. “I think that there's something really powerful about these classic pillars of storytelling that continue to bear fruit. It's okay to go back to those mythologies and question them, and play with them, and live in that space. A lot of really modern ideas can come out of that exercise. And I think that's something that I feel very pulled to, and that I really enjoyed with this piece in particular.”

She adds with a grin, “With that said, we all love monsters, and it's super fun to show them, and have monster sequences — and I know Joe loves it just as much.”





Leftys Gelateria



Pampas Helados

COURTESY SMORGASBURG

## FOOD

# WHAT'S UP POPPING UP

## Yoga-urt Turns 10 And Ice Cream Alley at Smorgasburg

BY MICHELE STUEVEN

**D**essert company Yoga-urt will celebrate its 10th anniversary on Saturday, July 12, marking a decade of its signature plant-based soft serve. Known for its creamy 100% dairy-free soft serve, all Yoga-urt locations will offer a new flavor, custom commemorative bamboo spoons for the first 50 customers at each location, a limited-edition birthday sundae, \$1 off all soft serve bowls from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. (one per customer), and the debut of new waffle cones made of homemade almond milk and almond flour.

Founded by Melissa Schulman, each batch of soft serve is made in-house from a base of hand-squeezed almond and cashew milk, infused with probiotics and free from dairy, soy, gluten, artificial sweeteners, and preservatives.

With over 35 original flavors—including fan favorites like Chocolate Bliss, Salted Caramel Zen, Strawberry Serenity, and Papa's Boysenberry Yoga-urt also has smoothies, kombucha floats, shakes, banana splits, soft serve pies, ice cream cookie sandwiches, and pints to-go.

Smorgasburg's Ice Cream Alley is back, featuring a lineup of pop-up vendors, new and old, as well as full-time frozen treat vendors, most of whom got their start at Smorgasburg by first popping up inside Ice Cream Alley.

This summertime favorite will run every Sunday through August 31, inside the entrance to Smorgasburg LA. Here is a list of the vendors you can expect to find this Sunday at the official launch:

- **626 Hospitality Group** – Returning to Ice Cream Alley for the 5th year in a row, this community-inspired, chef-driven soft serve shop honors the flavors of the San Gabriel Valley with their special,

only-available-at-Smorgasburg ice cream drinks, sparklers, and affogatos.

- **Lefty Gelateria** – Small Batch gelato from Michelin Awarded Chef Suyoung Park (from Jungsik in Seoul and New York City), featuring flavors like Date & Pecan and matcha, alongside seasonal sundaes, like their sweet potato gelato with a creme brûlée top.
- **Mateo's Ice Cream & Fruit Bars** – This legendary Los Angeles neighborhood favorite will be bringing their truck to Smorgasburg for the first time to serve their huge menu of nieves and famous paletas.
- **Pampas Heladas Argentinos** – Artisanal crafted Argentinian Helados, with flavors like rich South American chocolate, dulce de leche, pistachio, and flan, served with classic dulce de leche stuffed treats like alfajores and cubanitos.

Plus Smorgasburg resident vendors:

- **Bernie's** – Chef-driven shaved granita shaved ice made with real fruit and topped with a signature homemade toasted marshmallow.
- **Moom Maam Thai Gelato** – Think: Mad Scientist making Thai gelato, famous for their mango sticky rice ice sundae served with actual sticky rice inside a homemade waffle bowl. Gained their Smorgasburg residency after their debut at Ice Cream Alley 2023
- **Sad Girl Creamery** – A small batch Latina-owned and operated creamery serving popular nostalgic Latin-inspired ice cream tacos and small batch ice cream, while also raising awareness about mental health issues. 🗣️

# COMEDY Q&A: JOEL KIM BOOSTER LOVES MOVIES ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE GETTING MARRIED

BY MARK STEFANOS



Joel Kim Booster

COURTESY MICHAEL ROWE

Joel Kim Booster has been blowing up as a stand-up and on screen for the better part of the past decade. Adopted as an infant by a white evangelical Christian family and raised in Plainfield, Illinois, Booster's background comes alive in his work, often exploring themes of identity, sexuality, and cultural expectations.

He wrote, produced and starred in the Hulu film *Fire Island*, a queer twist on "Pride and Prejudice" that was met with rave reviews, and released his 2022 special "Joel Kim Booster: Psychosexual" on Netflix, showcasing how he cuts through the fluff with sharp, unapologetic comedy.

As an actor, he's been on *Shrill*, *Search Party*, *Sunnyside*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *Loot*, and he's written on *The Other Two*, *Billy on the Street*, and *Big Mouth*, where he also voiced the character Charles Lu.

He'll be performing at the *Belly Laughs comedy festival* this coming weekend, July 12 and 13, at L.A. Live. The festival's lineup is a who's who of Asian American comedians, and will feature over 20 of your favorite LA Asian restaurants to try.

Read ahead to find out how Joel Kim Booster became a multi-hyphenate in high school — both gay *and* the class clown:

**What was your childhood like?**

Brief.

**Where'd you grow up?**

Suburbs of Chicago.

**What was your favorite job?**

I worked at the library when I was 14 and it's still my favorite job.

**What kind of person were you in high school?**

I was the gay one mostly, which overlapped with being the class clown in many ways.

**Why did you start doing comedy?**

I was an actor and writer first, and quite honestly, stand-up started as a casual creative outlet for me while I looked for acting gigs, and ultimately became more interesting to me. I was able to be myself in a way I never had a chance to when getting called in to audition for a Chinese food delivery boy.

**Who are your comedy role models?**

Margaret Cho, Tig Notaro, Kumail, John Mulaney, Ms. Pat, Jacqueline Novak.

**You're on a stacked lineup of Asian comedians at *Belly Laughs* — what does it mean to you to share the stage with so many diverse Asian voices?**

It's incredibly meaningful to me — for the majority of my career, I've been the only Asian on the lineup, we were seldom booked together because the assumption was that all of our material would be the same. Opportunities like this give us a chance to prove that notion completely wrong, but even more so, it gives us a chance to hang and be a community. It's all very exciting.

**We've seen you perform all around town in comedy rooms and clubs. How do those gigs compare to performing in a big theater?**

It's a completely different experience, set of challenges, and requires a different skill set. I love smaller rooms because I like the intimacy and the connection you can make with an audience. Big theaters, you have to be a little bigger, maybe less granular, but still find a way to form a relationship with 1000+ people as opposed to 350. But the different challenges they present make it all way more fun, keep you on your toes, and make sure it never feels stale.

**Who's your doppelganger?**

Well people think it's Bowen Yang but that's obviously racist. I don't think I've ever been told I look like someone I actually look like.

**FAVORITES**

**Comedy movie:** *My Best Friend's Wedding*

**Drama movie:** *Rachel Getting Married*

**TV comedy:** *30 Rock*

**TV drama:** *The Leftovers*

**Video game:** *The Last of Us 2*

**Video game system:** PlayStation 5

**City:** Mexico City

**City to do comedy?** New York or San Francisco

**Food:** Pasta

**Swear word:** Fuck 🌚



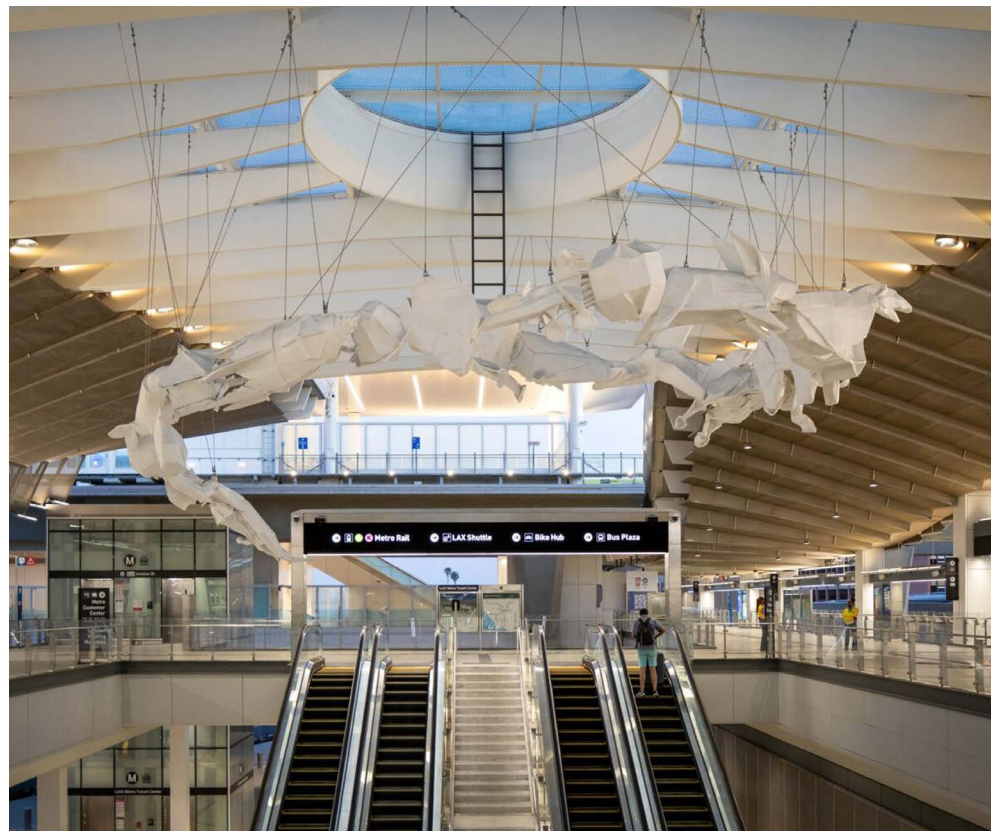
Glenn Kaino

COURTESY LA METRO

ARTS

# ARTIST GLENN KAINO HELPS TRAVELERS FEEL THE DISTANCE OF THE SUN AT THE NEW LAX/METRO TRANSIT CENTER

BY MICHELE STUEVEN



LAX Metro Transit Center Station

The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro) celebrated the official opening of the LAX/Metro Transit Center station last month. Metro is now ready to welcome global fans headed to Los Angeles for major events, like the FIFA World Cup 26, Super Bowl LVI, and the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The grand opening of this station marks the eighth project completed in Metro's ambitious Twenty-Eight by '28 initiative, a comprehensive plan to enhance the region's transit infrastructure in time for the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The state-of-the-art transit center is a large-scale open station concept, with continuous swooping canopies guiding users' views through large open spaces and includes walking access to buses and light rail trains, and the soon-to-be-opened Los Angeles World Airports Automated People Mover.

Located at Aviation Blvd./96th St., the LAX/Metro Transit Center Station signifies that the K line is a fully functional connection in Metro's network. Connecting Metro's C and K rail lines, six Metro bus lines, and eight municipal bus lines, including Beach Cities, Big Blue Bus, Culver City Bus, GTrans, Torrance Transit, and LAWA shuttles to and from the terminals.

This station features towering artwork at the center of the station, by Los Angeles native artist [Glenn Kaino](#), *The Distance of the Sun*. Commissioned by Metro Art, the suspended sculpture is made up of a series of vessels for travel, both real and imagined, rafted together in increasing size to create a spiral pathway towards the sky above. The work is a meditation on collective ambitions and shared hope, acting as a bridge to the future created from the designs of the past

All Metro Art commissioned artists are selected through an open, competitive selection process following the recommendation of a panel of LA-based arts professionals. Kaino was selected from 44 artists who were considered for this opportunity.

"This particular artwork comes from the vein of connectivity," the East LA native tells *LA Weekly*. "Two stories collided together to make it become a sculpture. For a long time, I've been a fan of writer Italo Calvino. There's a short fiction story he wrote, *The Distance To The Moon*. In the story, the moon orbited the Earth with such tight gravity that you could row a boat into the ocean, and with a ladder, you could harvest moon goods. As the gravity weakened, the moon drifted away, leaving friends and lovers further apart, which is why we gaze at the moon so longingly

"During the eclipse years ago, I was



Glenn Kaino at the LAX Metro Transit Center station

COURTESY LA METRO

walking up the hill to Griffith Park from my home in Los Feliz and like a bad dad, I forgot to order the special glasses ahead of time," says Kaino, who has an unending fascination with space travel. "One thing you cannot do on the day of an eclipse in Los Angeles is find a pair of eclipse glasses at Target. In the end, Griffith Park had them, and we joined the crowd at the observatory. I turned back and saw thousands of people of every race and gender already on the grass, looking up, and it was hours before the eclipse. It was humbling. The capacity of this moment when we're all together reminded me of everyone looking at the sun, and I thought of connecting those two stories. What does it look like for us to imagine that moment when we can just climb up and touch the sun?"

The artwork theme is a series of ships that are moored together and connecting to build a ladder that can metaphorically touch the sun. The sculpture is meant to evoke a remnant of one's cultural past, childhood memories, and dreams of space flights of people represented across history up until the current moment. The first one is the lunar lander, which sets the story off and ends with a cyclops and a backpack.

It was designed in partnership with world-famous origami master Robert Lang, who works in the space program designing satellites at NASA, taking one-dimensional drawings and turning them into three-dimensional objects.

"That building and that moment represent one of the highest moments of collision of demographics around the city

and will likely represent that for many decades to come," says Kaino. "There are so many travelers across classes and destinations. Thousands of workers work there. Everything from the first-class traveler to the worker and everything in between to every destination, it's all about us looking up together."

The station also features a bus plaza, bike hub, customer service center, and spans more than 1,100 feet from north to south, and has security coverage monitored 24/7 by security operations staff.

As part of Metro's commitment to sustainable urban planning, the station also includes environmentally friendly features like energy-efficient lighting, landscaping with native plants, and plans for further expansion to accommodate future growth. [1]