STOP TRAFFIC: A commuter admires model Bella Nabiyah's corporeal canvas, part of a Times Square exhibit by the infamous New York body-painter Andy Golub. He has been painting bodies for nine years.
CLAD IN jeans and an intricately patterned blue shirt, Andy Golub is onstage at the tiny Gene Frankel Theatre in Manhattan, painting. Seventies folk music floats from the stereo. There’s a murmur of fans and photographers scattered around the seats. And Golub’s canvas is a living, breathing (though, to her credit, not really moving) art student named Dylan.

Golub, 49, is New York’s most prolific body painter, and Dylan is one of his favorite models. “Every time I’ve painted Dylan I got a good painting,” he says from the stage. Silent and expressionless, Dylan is nude except for a pair of black pants. Golub paints a yellow dagger down the center of her torso, black branches across her face, blue circles over her breasts.

It’s a little like watching PBS maestro Bob Ross chip away at a snowy mountain, except every so often the canvas exhales and you’re reminded that she is a human being. Then the remaining clothes come off and, within an hour and a half, Dylan’s nude figure is a gleaming wonderland of weaving stripes and colors.

Golub is one of New York City’s few painters to have been arrested—at least recently—for his work. It’s not what he paints that offends; it’s what he paints on: people. Naked people, of any gender or body type. And in public too—Columbus Circle, Times Square, wherever. If you’re daring enough to strip, he’ll turn your bare human form into a psychedelic canvas of painted patterns.

Golub’s eccentric public presence and persona have catapulted him toward fringe-level New York City icon status. But his work disappears down the drain when the model steps in the shower.

“The idea of it being transitory—I think it is a neat sort of element that you don’t get with art so much,” Golub says.

Golub didn’t invent this medium. From ancient tribes in Asia and Africa (where humans are believed to have adorned their bodies with mud images of gods and war) to the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair (where inventor and cosmetics kingpin Max Factor Sr. was arrested for decorating burlesque dancer and actress Sally Rand in movie makeup), body-painting has a long
history. The art form hit the mainstream with a 1992 *Vanity Fair* cover starring Demi Moore in a painted-on suit; by 2000, body paint had become a regular feature in *Sports Illustrated*’s annual Swimsuit Issue.

The difference is that Golub isn’t satisfied with art fair exhibitions and photo shoots behind closed doors. He likes to bring his work—and his NSFW process—into public venues. In mid-July, he hosted the second annual NYC Bodypainting Day, a convergence of 100 fully nude models and 75 painters in midtown Manhattan. Afterward, Golub led a naked march to the United Nations building. One veteran model, Abbey Jasmine Watt, said she was there for activist reasons. “I believe that nudity and sexuality don’t have to go hand in hand,” she said, wearing nothing but paint and moccasins.

“When I’m out in public, in Times Square or whatever, it’s this confusing thing to people,” Golub says. “They’re so not used to seeing it that they need someone to say it and confirm it. People come up, and they’re like, ‘What’s this for?’ And I’m like, ‘It’s public art!’”

Golub started out as a business major and art minor before flunking an important business test and deciding to major in his minor. He spent some years teaching art in the public school system, and later he became fascinated with painting unconventional objects: rocks, shoes, tables, cars. When he tried painting a mannequin, he realized that bodies made for pretty good canvases. He mentioned the idea to a friend at Artexpo New York in 2006 and got connected to some models.

“I remember just seeing my art walking around was this weird experience,” Golub recalls. “It made me feel like I should do more of it.” He did, and things escalated quickly to painting in public. Painting fully nude models. Painting fully nude models in public. Painting a lot of fully nude models in public.

Then came the heat. Golub has spent more time than anybody fighting for the right to paint naked models in New York. Public nudity is legal in the city, as long as it’s part of “a performance, exhibition or show.” But in 2011, he and two models were arrested. Another model, Zoë West, was arrested that summer. Civil liberties attorney Ron Kuby took on Golub’s fight pro bono and won. “I knew I was in the right,” Golub says, but when the charges against him were dismissed, the condition was that he and his models would

FREE FORMS: Though he’s no stranger to legal run-ins because of his chosen medium, Golub’s work is protected under New York law, which allows body-painting as long as it’s part of “a performance, exhibition or show.”
be arrested again if he tried painting fully nude models during the daytime. The implication that his work wasn’t fit for children’s eyes irked him.

So Golub reached out to the New York Civil Liberties Union, which contacted the city. New York officials conceded that Golub can legally paint naked men and women in public any time of day. (Three caveats: He can’t do it in front of a Toys R Us; he has to announce where and when it’s happening in advance; and his models are required to leave their underwear on until right before that area is painted.)

The artist celebrated by securing a permit from the parks department and planning the first NYC Bodypainting Day, in 2014. He’s still harassed by the police sometimes, but the cops in Times Square recognize him, and Golub is tired of fighting. He just wants to paint.

**NAKED AND HANDCUFFED**

So what’s it like to strip and get painted? And why is Golub flooded with volunteers?

Every model is different. “You can feel people who are positive and people who are negative,” he says. There are times when he can tell the subject isn’t in the right state of mind. Some are more interested in a sexual experience than an artistic one, others a little too into the attention.

For the model, results may vary. The experience could be a life-changing shot of body confidence, maybe a stimulating new hobby or secret pastime. At worst you could outrage your parents, get paint on your new sheets—maybe wind up naked in a police precinct.

So went the adventure of West, a professional model who has plenty of experience striking nude poses. There were cops on the scene the whole time she was painted in midtown Manhattan in 2011. They stood by when West removed her black G-string but pounced after Golub’s work was finished, hauling her, naked, into a police van.

West remembers being handcuffed to a bench in the juvenile delinquents room for about 20 minutes before being handed some clothes. Her thought process: “How did I get here? How is this my life?” She laughs about it now. “It was nerve-wracking, but I knew that I was [legally] protected,” she says. Golub had warned her that an arrest was possible, but he assured her the charges would be dropped, which they were. As a bonus, West’s ordeal blew up the tabloids and later landed her a nice payout from the city. If West were pursuing a career in, say, investment banking, those Google results might have been a problem. But she was thinking about pursuing modeling full time, and the publicity was the boost she needed.

For others, the rewards are more personal than professional. Golub has worked with models of widely varying physical shapes and health conditions. Several years ago, he visited a hospital to paint Fredi Grieshaber, a 65-year-old woman with Stage IV metastatic breast cancer. She died two months later. In a video capturing the moment, Grieshaber cries and says she’s “going out with a bang,” as Golub’s paint livens up the hospital-gray setting.

Kiki Alston-Owens, a 41-year-old woman from Staten Island, says the joy of being painted has helped her to cope with depression after losing nine children. (Doctors still don’t know what occurred during her pregnancies, or after, to cause her babies to die.) “When I’m out there, the paint becomes a barrier from the hurt, the pain, the sadness, the stress, everything that may be going on in my life,” she says. “Once that paint is on, it’s like a whole new me. It’s like everything is absorbed in the paint.”

Alston-Owens put on weight after her losses and now weighs around 250 pounds. She finds it empowering to be a plus-sized model in public venues. “[Body-painting] helped me to start seeing that even though my children aren’t here, there’s still beauty in me. That this weight, this stomach, these sagging breasts are not something that someone else will look at and say, ‘That’s obesity. That’s nasty.’ This is my story of survival. There’s a message behind all of this fat. There is a survival struggle.”