

In Detail

A Symphony of the City in Motion

Filmmaker Rose Salane speaks about capturing New Yorkers as they move through the city.

Sophie Cavoulacos, Rose Salane
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Artist and lifelong New Yorker Rose Salane has excavated New York City archives of all kinds, from the MTA's repository of counterfeit subway tokens to a collection of photographs taken from Windows on the World, the restaurant atop the World Trade Center. For her debut film, *Mercurial New York*, the artist filmed staged encounters across the five boroughs to create a kinetic, tender portrait that pulses with the geometries, sounds, and textures of contemporary city life.

In advance of [the film's premiere](#) in MoMA's [Modern Mondays](#) series, Salane shared the process of making her “psychological symphony of the city in motion” through deep dives into five moments from the film.

—**Sophie Cavoulacos, Curator, Department of Film**



Still from *Mercurial New York*. 2025–26. USA. Directed by Rose Salane

This film is full of psychological re-encounters with the ways I have moved through the city in the past. In high school, I would regularly pass through 34th Street, Herald Square, one of the subway system's biggest transfer stations. It feels like an obstacle course of stairs, ramps, and long escalators. In this scene, two men speak about the value of gold and how their frustrated clients should have invested in it two decades ago. I was really interested in filming this conversation from a top-down perspective. My cinematographers, Carlos Cardona, Justin Gold, and my sound recordist, Zach Bishop, embraced the obstacle-course architecture of the Herald Square station, which ultimately made the shot possible.

Location: 34th Street Herald Square Subway Station.

Shot 1: Overhead on escalator slow tilt up escalator: Wide shot that follows Rob, Robert



1st shot: Robert and Rob

Wide View AND/OR Play with tracking characters***

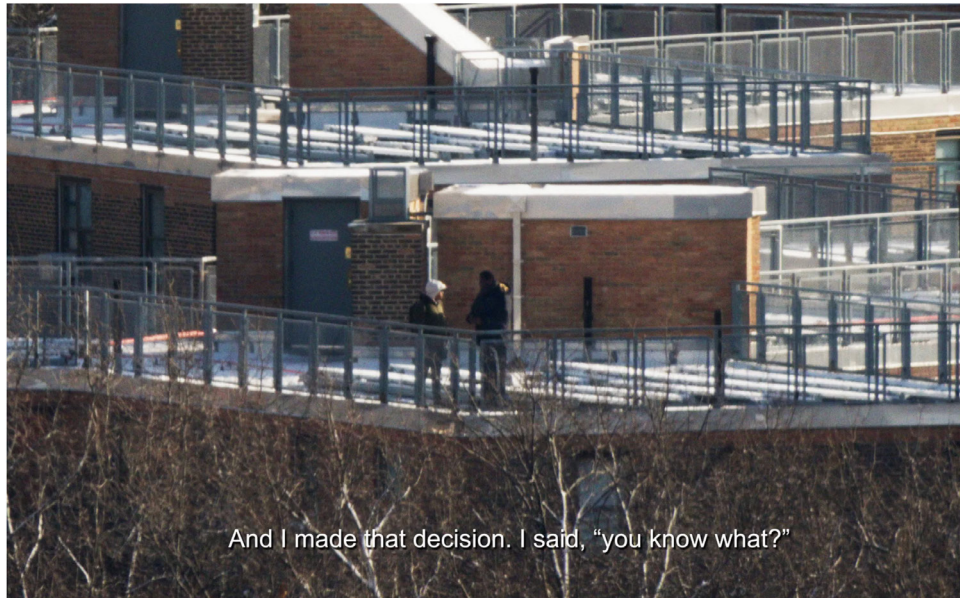
Both Robert and Rob walk into shot, we see them overhead (in a crowd of people)

They are talking about wishing they put more money into gold.

Robert and Rob go up the escalator speaking about co-workers that have invested in gold when it was cheaper.

Excerpt from Rose Salane's shot list for *Mercurial New York*

As the men navigate the 34th Street station and remark on the stability of gold, the camera follows them going up the escalator, then cuts to a side view of their conversation. Often when we're commuting, we observe people and then lose sight of them. Rarely do we encounter them again. I wanted to embrace this type of fleeting yet intimate contact that's so common in New York. This is where I found the sprinkles of humor that I think code the city, whereby everybody together absorbs something bizarre or funny if they're paying attention at the same time. We lose the two guys in this scene when they say, "Come on, I'll take you out to lunch. Where are we going to go.... I want a pastrami sandwich...when was the last time you had that?"

Still from *Mercurial New York*

This scene was built out in collaboration with Ralph, the man on the left in the white hoodie, and his friend Kareem, who's on the right. Ralph was initially in the film for a scene we shot in Chinatown. I reached out to him again because I remember he told me he grew up in the Queensbridge Houses. I thought it would be important to include Queensbridge Houses in the film as public housing is a defining aspect of New York City's landscape. It's also one of the largest public housing developments in the US, defines New York's hip-hop and rap legacy and looks out onto the Manhattan skyline. Being an artist and performer, Ralph was open to collaborating, so we built this scene together. Ralph introduced me to the community that he grew up with in Queensbridge, which was incredibly special.

Location: Queensbridge Houses Roof (3:30pm-4pm is best for sun)

Shot 3: Ralph, Kareem on roof from Roosevelt Island

Camera FX9, Lens TBC has to be 600mm with a doubler

Excerpt from Rose Salane's shot list for *Mercurial New York*

The shadows are me, Ralph, and Kareem. Friends since adolescence, Ralph and Kareem shared memories of their childhood growing up together, including the life changing realizations they came to in early fatherhood. We shot this scene from various distances. We started on a roof in Queensbridge, the camera following their shadows. Then we see them again, still on the roof, but from Roosevelt Island. This scene taught me how to link together subjectivity and the architectural infrastructures that define how we encounter the nuances and iconography of the city.



Still from *Mercurial New York*

This is a shot of the exterior of the Chrysler Building from the Empire State Building. In the film, a woman in the Chrysler Building overhears all the conversations going on in the city. She opens the blinds as the sun is setting. We used a 400 mm lens with a doubler, so we ended up with a focal length of 800 mm. A lot of the lenses we used in the film are photography lenses, the kind used in paparazzi photos and birdwatching. Later, we also used a massive field lens which went to 2000 mm.

View of Empire State Building
View facing South at top of Chrysler
CAMERA: ALEXA 35
LENS: TBC



TIME: BEGINNING SUNDOWN 3:45PM

WE BEGIN WITH A ZOOM INTO CHRYSLER BUILDING AS A WINDOW BLIND IS BEING OPENED FROM INSIDE THE CHRYSLER BUILDING.

WE HEAR ACTOR TALKING ON THE PHONE:

WE CUT TO INSIDE OF THE CHRYSLER BUILDING

THEY ARE STANDING AND WE SEE THEM IN A SILHOUETTE LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW FROM INSIDE CHRYSLER.
WE HEAR ACTOR TALKING ON THE PHONE.

Excerpt from Rose Salane's shot list for *Mercurial New York*

It was fun coordinating the blinds opening from one building to another. The angular dimension of the building becomes almost abstracted. I remember that there was a full moon that day. We shot the later scenes from inside the former Cloud Club atop the Chrysler Building, filming down at the street, where two young girls a few blocks away count the triangles in the building from ground level. The Chrysler Building and its Art Deco qualities remain such a defining tone of the idea of Gotham, so I knew I had to have them in the film. Thank you to Cooper Union for making this scene possible!

Still from *Mercurial New York*

This is one of the extended shots for the cinema cut that we are screening at MoMA. My team shot this from the Woolworth Building, another iconic early skyscraper. For each of these scenes, I did a site visit to map out the shot lists. I saw this view of the subway from the Woolworth's building window and thought, what if we have two lawyers walking up from the subway, speaking about a case they are working on?

SHOT LIST 6/26/26: WOOLWORTH BUILDING

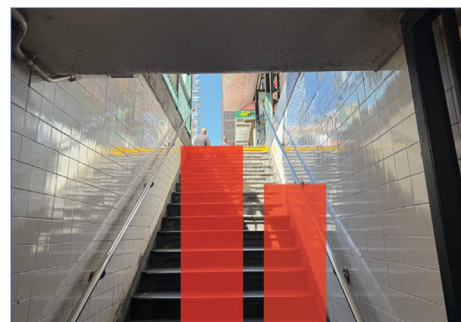
SHOT 1: CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO IMMIGRATION LAWYERS SPEAKING IN TAIWANESE

CAMERAS:

A CAM: ALEXA 35 WITH FUJINON 20-100MM (W/DOUBLER)

B CAM: FX3; LENS TBD

SHOOTING TIME: 11AM-2PM



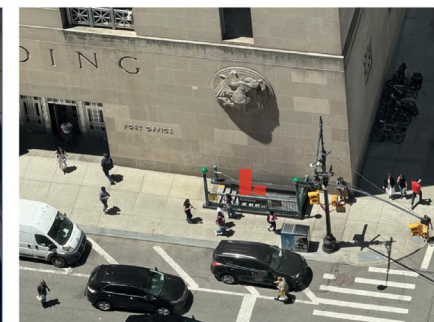
MEDIUM FULL SHOT AS THE TWO LAWYERS LEAVE THE TRAIN.

SHOT STARTS WHEN TALENT WALKS INTO FRAME

B-CAM: FX3; LENS TBD

ANYTHING WITH B-CAM IS ON THE GROUND

(B-CAM SHOT STARTS THE SCENE)



A-CAM: ALEXA 35 WITH FUJINON 20-100MM (W/DOUBLER)
A-CAM IS SHOOTING FROM 26TH FLOOR OF WOOLWORTH BUILDING. A-CAM WILL NOT BE LEAVING THE BUILDING FOR ANY SHOT

Excerpt from Rose Salane's shot list for *Mercurial New York*

The scene opens with this very intimate view from a vantage point in the Woolworth Building, very far away. The women are both lawyers speaking in Mandarin. One of them gets a phone call and they part ways. One lawyer speaks on her phone in Taiwanese; the other woman walks and speaks Portuguese to a different friend. A lot of the people that I'm filming speak multiple languages, depending on where they or their families grew up and their subsequent movements around the world.

Early on, when I was collecting images for sketching out the film, I wanted to capture the interactions of hands in public, in transactions and other kinds of exchanges. But it wasn't working. So I turned to the city's constant movement, the interaction and the flow of a particular chaos. The film quickly took shape by stitching together fragments of conversations in different languages moving through the air of the city. Film as a medium was the only way to anchor this sensation.



Still from *Mercurial New York*

This is one of my favorite shots. This shot proved to me that you have to work with people you trust, because it took about four takes, riding the trains back and forth, and we barely got it.

My sister, Carolina, and the other woman, Nadia, are miked. Zach, our sound recorder, and I are traveling in the subway car with them. My sister is the one with the hoop earrings; Nadia's facing her. To get this shot, I had to position Nadia at a slightly unnatural angle, so we could see her face. They talk while the train is heading downtown. Nadia asks, "How's your day been? What's going on?"

Location: Inside subway car beginning at 34th Street Herald Square Subway Station.

Shot 5: FX3 with sticks on Subway



4th shot: Carolina and Nadia
Wide Zoom Shot with 70-200mm lens

From another train we see Carolina and Nadia. They are speaking about their long work days.

The camera waits at an uptown platform at 34th Street. We prepared the set-up by watching exactly where the trains stopped and coordinating in which seat and car we would place the performers. To get the shot of them pulling into the station in the last train car window, we needed to make sure those seats were available. The shot was super challenging, but it really conveys the feeling I wanted to have for the film, because of its speed. I've wanted to create a shot like this since I was young where you can hear a conversation through the window of a subway car very clearly. When I was constructing these scenes with my sister and Nadia—who were just getting to know each other on camera—I was shocked by how natural they were. The camera was never in front of their faces. This is the key strategy I used in *Mercurial New York*: The camera is so far away that the subject forgets. What comes out is the empathy that people show when they are just listening.

Mercurial New York screens at MoMA on Monday, October 26, in [An Evening with Rose Salane](#), part of our Modern Mondays series.