

Josephine Meckseper Drills to New York's Dark Center

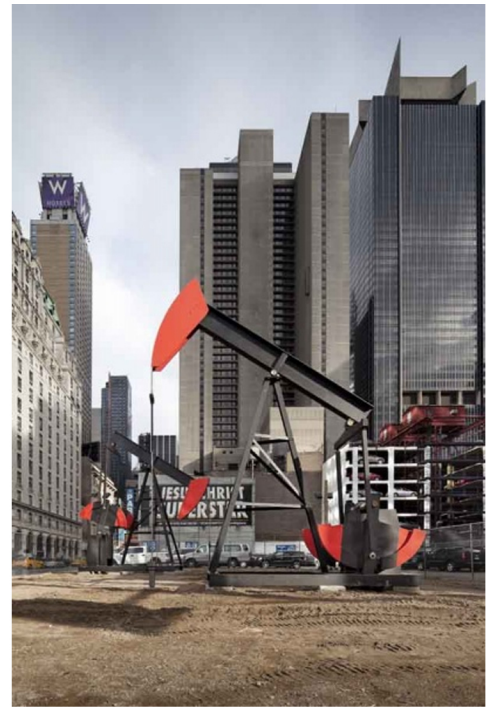
by aimee walleston 03/05/12

This spring, Josephine Meckseper brings the pernicious quest for black gold to New Yorkers' backyard. "Manhattan Oil Project," the artist's first foray into monumental public sculpture, opens Mar. 5 at The Last Lot, a project space at 46th Street and 8th Avenue administered by Art Production Fund. The kinetic sculpture consists of two life-size steel oil pumpjacks, modeled after mid-20th-century rigs the artist found in Texas.

"Last fall, I made a trip to Texas to look at how oil pumpjacks were still being used," Meckseper told A.i.A. on the evening before the concrete foundations for the sculptures would be poured. "A lot of the jacks are not being used now, so what I saw in Texas was almost more of a cemetery for oil pumpjacks-like a science fiction monument to the past."

"Manhattan Oil Project" is based in part on an exhibition Meckseper created in 2009 for the Migros Museum in Zurich, which featured two red-and-black pumpjack sculptures (Oil Rig #1, Oil Rig #2). "The context for those sculptures, as opposed to 'Manhattan Oil Project,' was about where the U.S. had arrived in the last years of the Bush administration," says Meckseper. "The pumpjacks operated as a signifier of that particular period, and the reasons the war was fought in Iraq: for natural resources."

For Meckseper, the rigs stand in for quintessential Americana, referencing the specific economic and cultural history that frames America's oil industry. "Before oil, the idea of wealth in the U.S. wasn't as prominent. Wealth from oil really changed the texture of the culture in America. And of course the same thing happened to the Middle East." The plotlines of major motion pictures from *Giant* to *There Will Be Blood* have proposed that the fall of America begins with a dribble of crude oil (and the evil gleam of avarice in men's eyes). Meckseper's piece falls in line with these parables in some ways, while also aligning the history of America's oil consumption with a larger tale of globalization. Oil—here, in the form of pumpjacks—is used as a physical metaphor for the mystification of global economics. Meckseper's sculptures formalize the concealed initiatives of capitalism, repurposing the physical identity of crude oil—and its conduits—in the service of larger concepts of power and control.



Meckseper counterpoints the myriad billboards that carve a story of commerce into the streets of Times Square. She views her sculptures as critical of capitalism, and as a call to arms in line with the new identity of Mark di Suvero's monumental sculpture *Joie de Vivre* (1998). "In scale and color, they are definitely a nod to di Suvero," says Meckseper. "His sculpture at Zuccotti Park has become an emblem for Occupy Wall Street, and I am interested in public sculpture becoming a symbol for political action. I believe in that potential in art."

Meckseper is known for creating appropriative sculptures that beguile with the shiny, happy charm of the commodity playthings from which they are derived. When she repurposes luxury items, displaying them on mirrored, retail-ready showcases—she does so to challenge their ubiquity. What we are blind to becomes a literal mirror. To this end, Meckseper's pumpjacks promise to be in the spirit of Times Square itself—disconcertingly spectacular and fun. "It's extremely gratifying to make something for people who don't necessarily pay attention to art," she says. Like theatrical set pieces, the sculptures behave as props for the set of Midtown Manhattan, illustrating the machinations of power and force that run the city.

"The key thing is that they operate as a mystery object, something real and yet also fantastical," says Meckseper. "They look extremely real, and technically, they could pump oil. So at first glance people will say 'Wow, now we're drilling for oil in New York City?'"