



CULTURE

ART

Uncommon Ground: Josephine Meckseper's New Installation Takes Shape in Times Square

by Chelsea Allison



Photo: Carly Otness/BFAnyc.com

In recent days, mammoth metal oil rigs have come to squat on one of the last vacant spots left in Times Square, their ominous red heads craning 25 feet into the sky before dipping low into the earth. "Manhattan Oil Project," by New York-based artist **Josephine Meckseper**, features a curious contradiction between the slow, steady oscillations (eight revolutions per minute) of the rigs and the bustle of the capitalistic hub around them.

As in Meckseper's other work, "Manhattan Oil" calls out paradoxes in American society, like a culture of consumption and excess alongside a dependence on natural resources. "These oil rigs drum up a sort of cultural pathology that is emblematic of our time, where we have to fight wars over oil and irreparably damage the environment," Meckseper says. "But it trickles down. Some of those people who are walking by probably can't pay their oil bill."

Fabricated under her direction over a six-week period by Pabst Enterprises Equipment Co. in Elizabeth, New Jersey, Meckseper saw the rigs move for the first time just two weeks ago, shortly before they were moved to Manhattan. "They're incredible," she said, circling the kinetic structures as the project came to life. **Doreen Remen**, cofounder of Art Production Fund, which sponsored the show with support from Sotheby's, watched with some apprehension as Meckseper ventured a bit close. "They are frightening," Meckseper said, exuding a blithe cool in skinny jeans, a navy T-shirt, and a pair of black sneaker wedges, and approving of Remen's reaction. "There's an underlying aggression to it." Indeed, the terrifying quality conjured memories of Meckseper's visit to Electra, Texas—a ghost town formerly known as the pump-jack capital of the state—and the ceaseless, eerie swinging of phantom oil rigs that became the model for the "Manhattan Oil Project" sculptures.



Rendering of Manhattan Oil Project
Photo: Courtesy of Josephine Meckseper

Structurally, the rigs create a certain harmony between artistry (recalling Tinguely and Calder) and accessibility. "'Manhattan Oil Project' references modern sculpture as much as it does the sociopolitical realities of our time," noted Remen and Art Production Fund cofounder **Yvonne Force Villareal**. "It can be enjoyed by the general public and art enthusiasts alike."

It helps, too, that one of German-born Meckseper's most disarmingly quantities—in person and in her long body of work—is humor. "It doesn't always have to be completely didactic or dire when we look at political situations. But in this case the irony also comes with the location," she said. Just last week, after all, a banner for *Jesus Christ Superstar* became an unexpectedly poignant backdrop for the exhibition, wedged as it is within the theater district. "It adds a kind of slapstick quality."

The installation, with its tension between fantasy and reality, the theatrical and the ordinary, calls to mind her work as a young artist, when she created the is-it-fake-or-isn't-it tabloid *FAT* magazine. The critical leap here, of course, occurs when the viewer realizes the rigs probably *aren't* excavating oil. "But then the question becomes," she says, "What is it you're taking?"