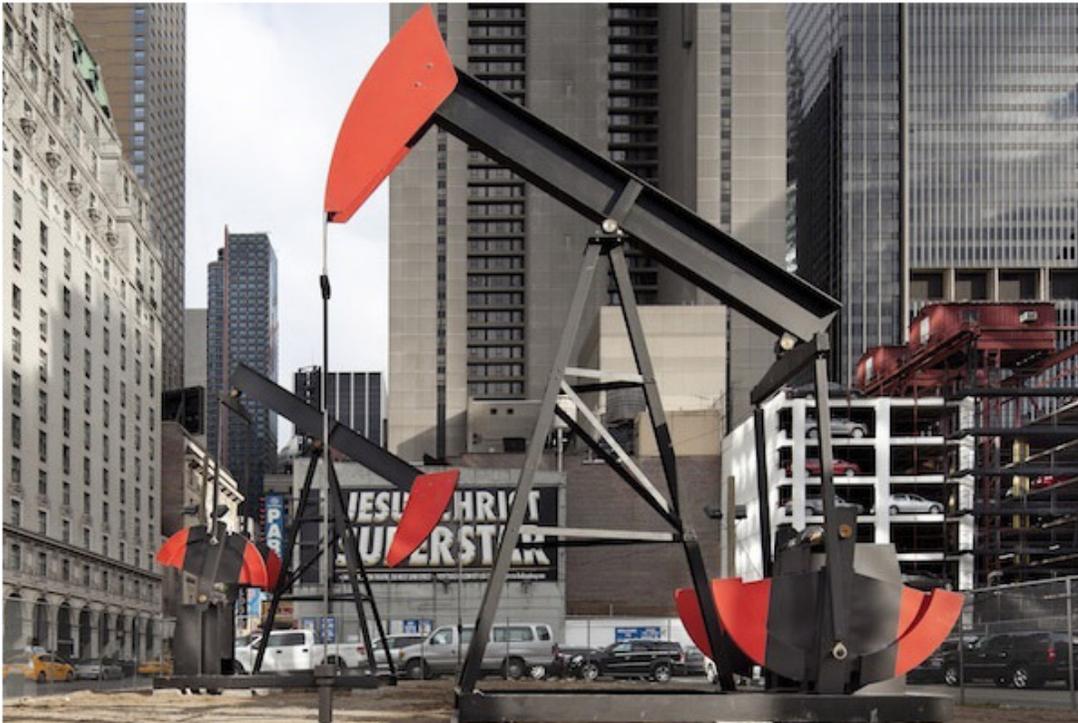


ARTFORUM



Josephine Meckseper

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Josephine Meckseper, Manhattan Oil Project, 2012, steel, plastic, hardware, paint, 25 x 23 x 6'.

For the Manhattan Oil Project, the German-born, New York-based artist Josephine Meckseper has installed two twenty-five-foot-tall sculptures inspired by mid-twentieth-century oil pump jacks in The Last Lot, a project space in Times Square organized by Art Production Fund. The project is on view from March 5 to May 6, 2012.

THIS IS technically my first large-scale public sculpture. In the 1990s I produced a conceptual magazine, FAT, which was kind of like public art because it was distributed at local newsstands. Similar to the magazine, the oil pumps are art disguised as something real. Both projects use recognizable generic forms to subvert an elitist art vocabulary, one typically not accessible to a broad audience.

My main motivation for installing oil pumps in the middle of Manhattan was to use forms that were already ingrained in people's consciousness and therefore inherently understandable. I wanted to make a conceptual monument representing what was going on in 2012, and the pumps signify various current sociopolitical issues—from war to the world economy to the exploitation of natural resources.

The oil pumps are made out of three tons of steel each. The familiar forms appear jarring when juxtaposed with throngs of tourists, harried office workers, and a sea of advertising. In this area of diversion and commercialism, the sculptures become the hard-edged reality of a culture that is defined by its control of supplies of natural resources.

The surrounding theaters provide a distraction and escape from such real-world issues. But the nearby Port Authority, on the other hand, defines the neighborhood more realistically. For many immigrants, this terminal is a launch pad for their hopes and dreams. Picking up on this notion, the pumps can be seen as symbolic of the quintessential American dream, left over from the frontier days: striking it rich.

A New York metal shop called Pabst Enterprises, which typically makes large metal specialty parts for big telecommunications networks, fabricated the sculptures. There are very few plants like this still working on the East Coast, since this type of production is now largely outsourced to China and elsewhere. It was important to me to work with a company that makes industrial products, not art sculptures. Fifty years ago this plant built giant parts for the US Navy. There are still old train tracks on the factory floor there, which reminded me of the giant steam train my father bought in the '70s and installed on nineteenth-century tracks next to the train station in my hometown, Worswede, Germany. The similarly anachronistic look of the oil pumps echoes the more innocent beginnings of the industrial revolution, now escalated to a tenuous reality defined by our dependency on oil.

— As told to Mara Hoberman