



## On Oil Rigs and Art in Midtown

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The two red and black steel structures at the corner of Eighth Avenue and West 46th Street whirl and churn just like rigs in the empty fields of Texas. In fact, the sculptures (yes, they are works of art) look so much like the real thing that about half the people who stop think someone has struck oil in the heart of congested midtown, said artist Josephine Meckseper.

"They want to know what company we are, whether we found oil," she said during an interview at the site on the fourth day of the exhibit. Her Manhattan Oil Project, erected on an empty dirt lot surrounded by a chain-link fence, continues through May 6.

"The other half, the European tourists, know it's art," she said.

The replica rigs are realistic by design, she said. The project aims to draw attention to society's dependence on natural resources. What better way to get people to think about that dependence than having them stumble upon the unexpected presence of two full-sized oil rigs in the middle of a city block? The artist said she got her inspiration for the design from visiting Electra, Texas, once the state's oil pump jack capital. The rigs there are now rusted and not in use, she said. Her replicas -- new and freshly painted -- were produced by a machine shop, Pabst Enterprises in Elizabeth, N.J. They are close to carbon copies of the originals, rising 25 feet high. The proximity of the exhibit to Times Square is not a coincidence. "Times Square wouldn't be lit up" without natural resources, Meckseper said. "It comes with a price."

The exhibit is being presented by the nonprofit Art Production Fund, which helps artists produce large-scale and

ambitious works. The location on the so-called "Last Lot," the empty parcel of land at 46th and Eighth, is on loan by the Shubert Organization in conjunction with the Times Square Alliance, the area's business improvement association.

It is perhaps ironic that a hurdle Meckseper faced in setting up the exhibit was finding a power source for the rigs, which simulate a drilling movement. The site, being an empty lot, had no electricity. Luckily, she found friendly neighbors ready to help. Pointing to a yellow electrical chord that was attached to the fence, she said it continued across a sliver of parking lot to the closest building, housing the Playwright Celtic Pub at 732 Eighth Ave. Meckseper said the pub's managers were very enthusiastic about the project and willingly allowed them to tap into their electricity. "Even in the insanity of the city, people are really helping each other out," she said.