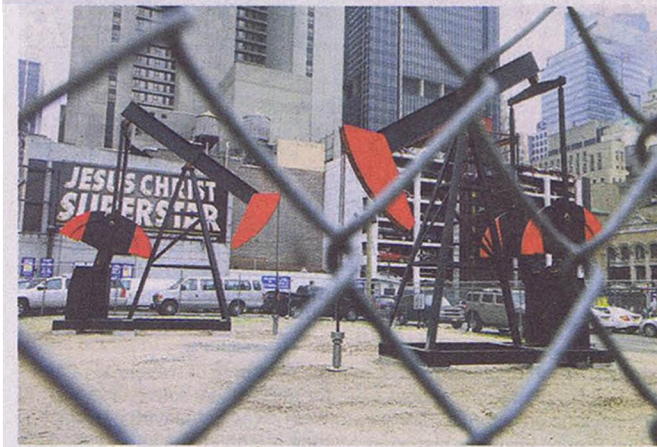




Art in Review



LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The seemingly functional full-scale oil rigs of “Manhattan Oil Project,” by Josephine Meckseper, in the theater district.

Josephine Meckseper

‘Manhattan Oil Project’

Art Production Fund
Eighth Avenue at 46th Street,
Clinton
Through May 6

Josephine Meckseper excels at subversive assemblage environments: storelike or vitrinelike displays involving combinations of found, bought and altered objects; images; and even video, with which she regularly tries to raise awareness about the scourges and pretensions of consumer culture.

Moralizing, one-note didacticism is something that she has avoided, at least until she decided to highlight environmental waste by plunking down two seemingly functional full-scale oil rigs in an empty lot in New York’s theater district.

“Manhattan Oil Project” is brought to us by the Art Production Fund, the Schubert Organization and Sotheby’s. In the Art Production Fund’s press statement, Ms. Meckseper describes the piece as “a conceptual gesture that raises questions about business and capital, land use and resources; wealth and decay; decadence and dependence.” One question is raised right off the bat: how much did this thing cost?

But never mind. The statement assures us that while the work formally “refers to the large-scale kinetic sculptures of Jean Tinguely, Alexander Calder and Mark di Suvero,” Ms. Meckseper’s effort is intended to ignite “critical discussion” . . . as opposed to “operating in the realm of disengaged abstract geometries.”

Bobbing up and down on a

rather well-kept corner lot, painted sharp tones of red and black, the pumps resemble two large birds pecking for grain, not to mention something that would be perfectly at home on a Broadway stage, say an updated revival of “Oklahoma.” They conjure Surrealism and Pop Art and are much tamer than their real-life precedents: for example, the actual functioning oil pumps that you drive past in the middle of Los Angeles, fouling the air with dust and fumes on the southern end of La Cienega Boulevard, one of the city’s art gallery arteries.

In New York on a balmy spring evening, with people heading for home or to precurltain suppers, there were a few double takes until passers-by read the signs identifying the rigs as art, but a surprising number of people barely seemed to notice them. It’s hard not to think that “Manhattan Oil Project” is just good, clean, public-art fun; pious and well-meaning, mildly entertaining, but nothing to get especially heavy, or ignited, about. **ROBERTA SMITH**