



THE Arts

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A Wildcat Operation in Midtown

By RANDY KENNEDY

In many parts of the country the pump jack — a kind of equine-pterodactyl metal monstrosity that perpetually extracts oil from a well — is as familiar a feature of the landscape as a tree or a telephone pole.

But to come across a pair towering over a vacant lot in Midtown Manhattan, with a “Jesus Christ Superstar” billboard on one side and a porn store on the other, is a little surreal, like a portrait of John D. Rockefeller by Magritte. The two pumps, 25 feet tall, materialized this week on a lot at 46th Street and Eighth Avenue where a hotel once stood, now the only remaining patch of undeveloped land in the neighborhood. On Monday the pumps will be activated and — at least if their creator, the German-born artist Josephine Meckseper, has her way — they will cause passers-by to think about a lot more than whether there might actually be black gold coursing beneath the urban bedrock.

“I think of them as a kind of fragment, a glimpse, into what our reality is,” said Ms. Meckseper, 47, whose work often operates at the intersection of culture, consumerism and power. “They are about people struggling to have enough money to pay their heating bills. But they are also about those same people’s desire for entertainment and culture, and about the costs of those things too.”

The sculptures were commissioned by the Art Production Fund, a nonprofit public art organization, as part of its Last Lot program, in collaboration with Sotheby’s, the Times Square Alliance and the Shubert Organization, which owns the chain-link-fenced lot and has donated it temporarily for art projects.



LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Josephine Meckseper with her moving pump jack sculptures in the lot at West 46th Street and Eighth Avenue in Manhattan.

Ms. Meckseper based the electric-powered pumps closely on mid-20th-century models used in Electra, a small town in north Texas once famous as the state’s pump jack capital. And while their red accents and arcing

Wednesday morning on the rough ground where the pumps had been installed.

Until May 6 they will lumber into motion twice a day — four hours in the morning and four in the evening on weekdays; continuously for eight hours on weekends — pumping nothing but conceptual crude while appearing to pump the real thing. They will probably not succeed in drowning out the constant stream of roaring, honking traffic headed east on 46th Street, but they will make the authentic, old-fashioned din of American industry.

“The fabricator asked if I wanted to make them noisier, but I said I didn’t want it to happen artificially,” Ms. Meckseper said. “If they were out here for a few years, they would start to make that horrible screeching noise. It’s a sound that I actually kind of love.”

Pumping conceptual oil, sound effects included.

forms inevitably evoke Alexander Calder and Ellsworth Kelly, she said it was important that they were pump jacks first and kinetic sculpture only second.

“The fact that they would really function is very important,” she said, standing in a light rain