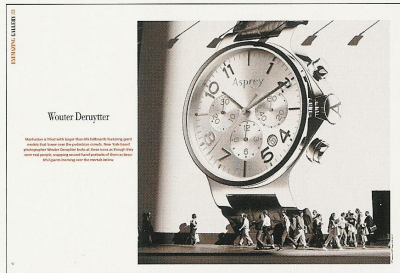


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Wouter Deruytter

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Manhattan is filled with larger-than-life billboards featuring giant models that tower over the pedestrian crowds. New York-based photographer Wouter Deruytter looks at these icons as though they were real people, snapping second-hand portraits of them as beautiful giants looming over the mortals below.

Deruytter - who was born in Belgium and initially came to New York to attend courses at the International Center for Photography - became obsessed with the Manhattan cityscape after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. "After 9/11, I really realized that New York was my city," he recounts. "I was doing the series on Arabs", he says, referring to a body of work that he continues to work on, "but it was like, 'how dare you attack my city'?" He began to roam the streets with his Hasselblad, stealing scenes of urban life and capturing unaware passersby with the city's ubiquitous billboards as the connecting thread between the photos. "The first time that I went out, I really photographed like a lunatic - I have thousands of negatives," he says. "There's just so much going on, and I didn't want to miss any of it. I got so excited about it, I could almost photograph 24 hours a day with this project".

The first shot in the series was taken in 1998, but most of the images were taken between 2001 and 2003. At first, Deruytter snapped scenes in which a billboard could be seen peeking out in the distance, dwarfed by the greater context of

the city. Later, as the series matured, the scale changed: The billboards became the focal point, moving into the foreground like stars on the stage of the metropolis. "They are almost like celebrities inhabiting the city, as if these giants are living in our town", muses the photographer. There's an uncanny quality to these portraits - they are portraits of portraits, after all. In one particular instance, the relationship between camera and billboard goes beyond uncanny into the realm of the absurd: the photographer depicts a poster for the musical Oklahoma that features a photo of a cowboy taken by Deruytter himself, as part of an earlier series on modern-day American cowboys.

All of the images in the billboard series were shot with a hand-held camera, which gave Deruytter the flexibility to snatch fleeting and unexpected scenes. In one such image, he catches a pair of hardboiled Upper East Side matrons passing in front of a gigantic billboard of Jennifer Lopez in a Louis Vuitton advertisement; in another, a group of nuns and priests are seen crossing the street at Times Square, amidst all of the glitz and lights, and with large pictures of lusty couples kissing and lounging in their designer underwear in the background.

Although none of the photographs are staged, there are times when ironic interactions occur between pedestrians and billboard models, where passersby seem to unwittingly respond to the postures of their oversized counterparts. In one of these shots, a black male model wearing a white undershirt and briefs soars as though flying across a horizontal billboard in Midtown, his arm outstretched with fingers extended, pointing to a lone umbrella-less man walking across the street in the rain. The model seems to be pointing directly at the man, as though he were a guardian angel looking out for the solitary wanderer. In another interaction between life and art, a Tribeca billboard for the flop sequel to the Dumb and Dumber film shows a row of figures, starting with the movie's two crouching stars, and moving gradually through the phases of human evolution right up to the upright Homo sapien. Each character appears to be walking toward the right, while on the street below them, a cluster of four male pedestrians walk in the opposite direction, seemingly crossing paths with the men in the poster behind them.

One of the most arresting images shows a poster of the model Iman in an ad campaign for the clothing chain H&M. Her Amazonian figure, already tall in real life, looms so large on the vertical billboard that she conjures up images of King Kong or

Godzilla. A crane jutting out from a nearby construction site apes the angle of her canted posture, while a streetlight soaring over the top corner of the photographer's frame seems about to graze the top of her head. She looks a bit lonely up there, with no super-human, 50-foot man in sight to keep her company.

In many of Deruytter's images, passersby caught in spontaneous motion appear to be acting out a choreographed dance. Though it is not an illusion the artist is conscious of, it may be a testament to his earlier photographs of professional dancers: He was, after all, once the photographer for the choreographer Maurice Bejart, and after that, for the Cairo Opera House in Cairo, Egypt.

One striking image from the billboards series depicts an enormous ad for Asprey, with a huge Asprey watch on a white background that takes up almost the entire frame of Deruytter's photo. A cluster of pedestrians walk beneath it, some going left and some going right, crossing each others' paths as though in a prearranged modern dance performance. In another scene, four prominent figures walk in different directions into, out of, and past a subway station, while a female model in Calvin Klein underwear lounges horizontally on a billboard above them. Although nothing more than a simple moment of everyday city life, the directions of the pedestrians' shadows, their postures leaning this-way-and-that, and the formation of the space between them is somehow perfect, as if their paths had been prescribed to collide in this moment of harmony.

But it is precisely the fact that Deruytter's subjects are unaware of his lens that makes these photographs so intriguing. The regular city dwellers walk past his frame, entirely oblivious to him as well as to the towering figures around them. The models, meanwhile, stare directly into the camera, but they do so unwittingly, having no idea that they are being photographed again months after posing in a studio for an advertisement. The metaphorical interactions between the two subjects are fleeting and ethereal, taking place for just one moment in the eye of the detached third-party observer. Deruytter's city is one that exists only through the flattening lens of the camera, which collapses the real and surreal into a single, charmed dance.

Text by Anna Holtzman

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