

Living large: Turning the camera on NY's billboards

BY DAN BISCHOFF
Star-Ledger Staff

The Isle of Rhodes had the colossus. Egypt had the Sphinx. Afghanistan, until recently, had the two colossal statues of the Buddha at Bamiyan.

Now the Big Apple has King Kong-sized primates -- many of them in their underwear.

And many of them photographed by Wouter Deruytter, a Belgian-born artist who has called New York City his home for nearly a decade. One of the things he couldn't help but notice about his adopted city is the way New Yorkers live against a backdrop of gigantic commercial images.

Giant photos of models or products have only begun to appear on the streets of Europe, and then usually only to announce grand openings, as a kind of curtain ad that replaces soaped-up shop windows (these curtains come down when the business opens).

Well, they don't call it the Big Apple for nothing, and Deruytter has shot scores of wall-sized people all around the city, ranging from a 20-foot-tall image of a girl reclining in her underwear on Times Square to a striding male model draped over the side of a 20-story building at Lafayette and Bleecker. Through the end of September, in his first museum show in New York, Deruytter will be showing large-format black-and-white pictures of his adopted hometown at the Chelsea Art Museum.

The Brobdingnagian scale of street ads in New York has always been a city hallmark, just as the sculptural, often punning shop signs were Newark's signature in the 19th century (you can see examples at the Newark Museum in the American wing). Before World War II, the kinetic, neon- and animated-incandescent signs in Times Square were a major form of free entertainment, from the Lucky Strike cigarette that blew Pentagon-sized smoke rings to the Kleenex ad, which featured cartoon character LuLu pulling tissue after neon tissue out of a box.

By the late 1980s many of these signs had been removed, and increasingly were being replaced not by animated neon but by video screens. Huge, still human figures seemed to be disappearing from the cityscape. Urban planners working on the new Times Square Project actually rewrote zoning requirements for new buildings in the Square to encourage the return of giant advertisements, requiring architects to include extra electrical, water, and fiber-optic plumbing in the walls of all new construction.

Then, in the early '90s, a new way of printing photos on vinyl strips was developed in Asia that allowed to make enormous photos, many stories high, by sewing together a series of narrow, digitally-printed bands of plastic.

And suddenly there were giants on the walls again, downtown especially, but in midtown and even uptown, wherever, actually, there was a blank wall and eyes to sell to. By the time Deruytter began taking these photos in 1996, New York was once again being stalked by Gulliver-sized pretty people in various states of undress.

And what impact did being overshadowed by 50-foot-tall women in Jockeys have on the average New Yorker?

"Actually, I don't think they notice," says the artist, and in fact, most of his pictures show passersby who appear oblivious to the silhouette they cut against giant cheek or thigh. Even in his shot of New York's famous Naked Cowboy on Times Square ("He's been there for three years, a thousand dollars a day he makes in tips," Deruytter says), the Cowboy stands in his eponymously sequined undies without looking up at a Roca Underwear model whose skivvies dwarf his own.

"I always try in my photos to take pictures of what we tune out," Deruytter says. "I'm not sure what more these billboards could do to shock people into noticing them ... I mean, the billboard that showed a woman pulling down a man's jeans and biting his ass (the ad filled a block-long wall near SoHo, for Calvin Klein) is pretty far out there."

Still, many pedestrians do learn the knack of not seeing their city -- anyway, of mentally editing a sidewalk stroll so that they see the virtual cityscape in their heads and not the insistent barking of the latest billboards. It's a skill born of an over-advertised life. Studies have shown that the average American sees upwards of 500 ads a day, and each season brings a wave of new ad venues -- backseat taxicab video monitors, cell phone pop-ups, the inside doors in lavatory stalls, and on.

Throughout art history giant representations of the human form have been used to express quasi-religious state power--you know, like the Colossus of Memnon, or the giant chryselephantine sculpture of Zeus at Olympus, or Mt. Rushmore. Even when the giant figure is female, as with the Statue of Liberty and the ancient figure of Athena that stood in the Parthenon, they express a kind of stately power: the Athena was in full armor, and few ladies are statelier than Liberty.

But most of the titans of New York are women, most either in deshabille or striking fashion poses unimaginable to pre-photographic eras. Some are far larger than almost any ancient figure (only the Sphinx can match the scale of vinyl strip photos, which can fill the side of a modern skyscraper). And yet, though in plain sight, they are invisible -- except in Deruytter's photos. Is this just ad-fatigue, or is it something about images of women -- perhaps something about the fantasies of and about women projected by commercial culture?

"You know, I went through three stages while taking these pictures," Deruytter says. "First I was seeing the giant pictures in the cityscape. Then I was seeing the way regular people live with them, yet are unaware of how they look before them.

"But finally, the billboards started smiling at me. They became like celebrities that only I noticed, my special friends. And I gave them the thing celebrities need -- I noticed."

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LOOK UP!

Photographer Wouter Deruytter turns his lens on the billboards of N.Y.
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Wouter Deruytter's photograph of a billboard at Lafayette and Bleeker streets in Manhattan, part of an exhibition of his work at the Chelsea Art Museum.

Living large: Turning the camera on N.Y.'s billboards

ART
Wouter Deruytter
Billboards NY
Where: The Chelsea Art Museum, 556 W. 22nd St., New York City
When: Through Sept. 24. Regular hours are noon-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; open 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursday.
How much: \$6; students and seniors \$3. Call (212) 255-0719 or visit www.chelseaartmuseum.org.

BY GAIL MURPHY
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

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