



Wouter Deruytter

## Deruytter's New York: Billboards, Sex and Indifference in the City

By Emmanuelle Soichet

NEW YORK - New Yorkers have always been easy to spot among the Times Square throngs: They don't look up.

This primacy of indifference in a thicket of sensory overload seems to be the inspiration behind Belgian photographer Wouter Deruytter's four-year endeavor to shoot the city's billboards, an exhibition now at the Chelsea Art Museum.

Through a series of black-and-white photographs, Deruytter makes a pithy statement about both advertising — it's everywhere! it's dripping in lust! — and the isolation of city life. And he does it not without a smirk.

Deruytter's New York is a city dissected into two worlds: that of mere mortals, faceless walkers in life, and the Olympus-like stratosphere of billboard models and celebrities, whose physical presence dominates the cityscape.

Airbrushed to physical flawlessness, the billboard gods tower from above, fighting each other for space and attention from across streets corners, impervious to the unpleasantness of our world.

So in a snow storm, Swedish soccer heartthrob Freddy Ljungberg — sweating sex appeal in his white Calvin Klein bikini and oiled skin — can leer down to a dark mass of anonymous bodies shuffling through grey slush of Times Square in winter. Or, another jumbo-sized male underwear model can float horizontally above a subway

entrance like a winged angel, his outstretched arm almost touching a pensive man walking by. The man, of course, is clueless to this attempted divine intervention.

Viewing the scenes in a museum changes everything. The indifference of the street is broken, and the billboards move from background filler to primary subject. From this critical distance, they often shock.

Deruytter forces the question how much sex we will tolerate in advertising — and how much soft pornography it takes to penetrate New Yorkers' mental armor. In one Calvin Klein ad, a shirtless man in jeans crawls on the pavement as a woman tries to pull off his jeans and lick his exposed behind. In another, a topless couple lies in bed, the women's head thrown back in ecstasy, her nipples covered by her lover's hands.

The images' shock-factor is only amplified by the almost comic obliviousness of the laymen in the scene.

Again in Times Square, Deruytter offers a picture of four nuns and Benedictine monks crossing the street under the seductive gaze and slightly agape mouths of two half-nude female models (in a Swatch ad). A tourist crouches down to snap a photo of the ubiquitous "naked cowboy" — a man who struts around Times Square in boots, underwear and cowboy hat — oblivious to the equally naked model beaming down from a billboard behind him.

Occasionally New Yorkers take on their godly city-mates, cutting holes in ads plastered to the sides of apartment buildings for windows. And occasionally, the inattention leaves the billboard inhabitants alone and weak, imbued with desperation when no one watches.

*"Wouter Deruytter: Billboards NYC" runs through September 24, 2005 at the Chelsea Art Museum. For more information, see [www.chelseaartmuseum.org](http://www.chelseaartmuseum.org).*

*All Images Courtesy of The Chelsea Art Museum, New York.*



Times Square  
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