

**WOUTER DERUYTTER:  
BILLBOARDS, NY.**  
The Chelsea Art Museum, 556 W.  
22nd St. Through Sept 24.



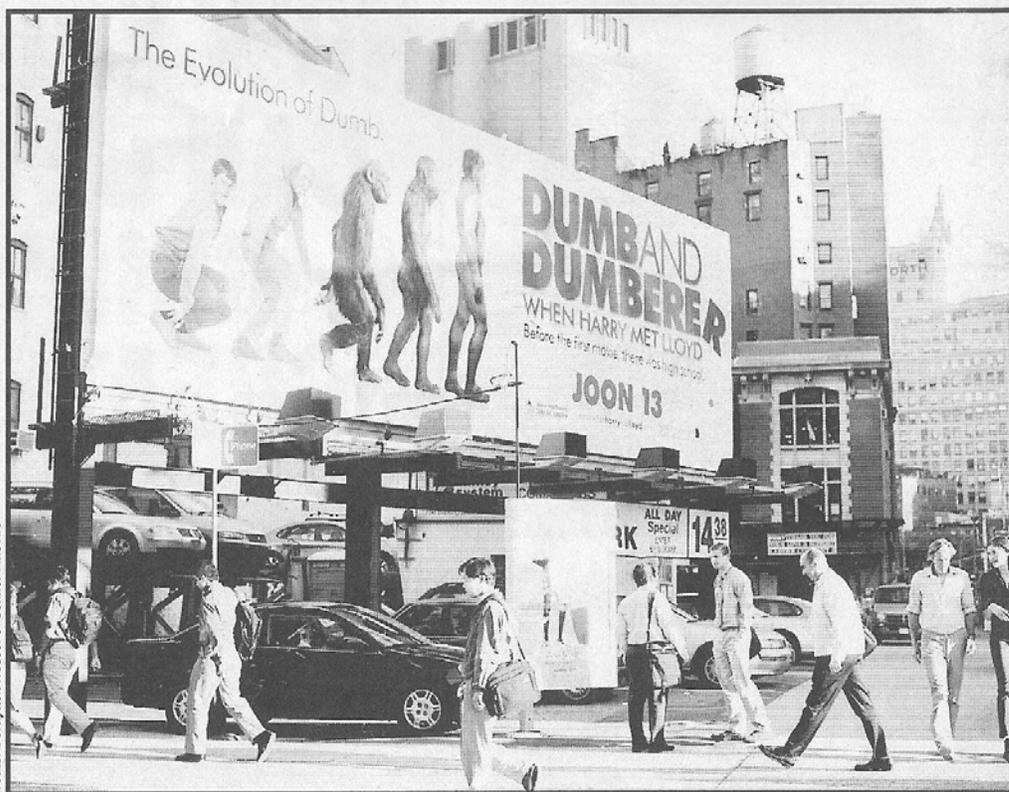
**James  
Gardner**

**L**EAVE it to the Europeans to mythologize New York. For those of us who were born here or simply reside here now, the Big Apple is such a fine place to live that it often awakens a local patriotism that can surpass what we feel for the nation and certainly the state to which the city belongs.

Even so, we don't mythologize our city the way the Europeans do in general and the way the Belgian photographer Wouter Deruytter does in specific, in an exhibition devoted to the curious interaction between Manhattan billboards and the life of the street.

For Deruytter, New York is essentially Manhattan — and Manhattan, rather than being the Plaza Hotel or Central Park, The Cloisters or Columbia University, is a honky-tonk and picturesquely hard-scrabble place of warehouses, car repair shops and shopping centers.

In his first museum show in the United States, Deruytter has exhibited a number of his works at the Chelsea Art Museum, an odd European enterprise that is run by the Miotte Foundation. One has a strong sense that this exhibition was intended less for the New Yorkers who are portrayed in the images than for the French, Belgian, Dutch and German tourists who relentlessly pound the pavements of the Meatpacking District, Delancey Street and Chelsea in search of Amerika.



Wouter Deruytter/Wessel O' Connor Fine Art

In "Varick + Beach St., 2003" a billboard advertising the movie "Dumb and Dumberer" mocks pedestrians.

Deruytter's mythology begins with the water towers that rise over so many buildings in Manhattan and that typify, for transfixed Europeans, the unadorned functionalism and democratic insouciance of New York.

In one image, taken apparently in SoHo, the water tower rises over a billboard of one scantily clad Calvin Klein model, which itself rises about a Timberland store and a car wash.

The water tower appears again in

the photograph above, which features a billboard that advertises the '03 movie "Dumb and Dumberer," in which a sequence of hominids, starting with a hunched-over Jim Carrey-esque lead character, rise through gorillas to modern man. The joke is that the people who dart by in the street below have the same compromised posture.

At other times, the message gives way to form and content.

Beneath a voluptuous image of a woman with the words, "the next best thing to being naked," is an NYPD van from which an officer emerges to examine a "situation."

Even if these works are intended for Europeans, we natives can have a good enough time seeing ourselves through the eyes of others, not to mention the pleasure of trying to figure out where each picture was shot.

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By James Gardner

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