

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2006 ★ TORONTO STAR ★ G9

What's On



MICHAEL STUPARIYK/TORONTO STAR

A worker's coat adds to "In Sit You," now at the Sculpture Garden which marks its 25th anniversary.

TORONTO STAR

The art of the message

★ VISUAL ARTS

PETER GODDARD
VISUAL ARTS COLUMNIST

The great days of the billboard have long gone, at least for those wooden or metal frame jobs that once punctuated the highways.

As markers along the landscape, they stood wind-battered but resolutely selling the virtues of one brand of cigarette or another. Now, they're rotting rectangles of wood.

Nostalgia for the pre-TV days of the two-dimensional silent billboard is part of the lure of "In Sit You" (2006), the billboard-sized, Op art kinetic sculpture by Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins at Toronto Sculpture Garden celebrating its 25th anniversary with the installation.

The two Toronto artists have had the good fortune to position their work directly opposite St. James Cathedral. What could be more trenchant? Buying is a form of believing, after all. Isn't the enormous church's neo-Gothic façade a billboard of sorts, representing something that's being sold inside? Believing is a form of buying into something, after all.

Marman and Borins have made this connection apparent by plunking a solid, pew-like park bench in front of their overhead sculpture, should anyone feel inclined to sit for the purpose of contemplation — hence the title's transparent pun on the Latin term, "in situ," meaning work done on, or for, a specific site.

"In Sit You" also reflects the Sculpture Garden's increasingly focused sense of mission. Garden organizers came to realize that the best work, "responded specifically to its place in the city and to what it looked like formally, (to) what the architectural scale and materials were," says Rina Greer, herself an artist and the force behind the space, once just a parking lot.

For Marman and Borins, that meant channeling the inherent pent-up commercial energy inherent in any billboard into something more stable, in order give the spectator something to think about — other than reaching for a credit card, that is.

"In its visual appeal there's a certain Zen-like quality to (the work)," admits Borins. "And that's due to its purely visual aspect. It doesn't have many linguistic references. It doesn't have any political references through language."

For content, there's a rainbow array of intensely coloured three-inch wide stripes that flip in one direction then another, in an artistic re-thinking of the "Tri-Vision" billboard. By way of exposing one side of a flat surface then the other, this older, panel-flipping billboard technology can produce more than one message with in the same rectangular frame.

At one moment, "In Sit You" is all about vertical energy as it frames a regimented series of rigid vertical stripes packed together with an almost impulsive energy. The next moment it's all angles and less aggressive, with layer upon layer of bright stripes, each at a 60-degree angle to one another. And it never stops, this shape flipping. Clement Greenberg, the late, much-feared critical guru of abstraction, once warned, "About-ness doesn't specify the substance of an aesthetic experience." Exactly. The non-commercial "message" from "In Sit You" is about itself.

Mammoth roadside video screens, or vast LED-type displays flashing instant messages, have plugged the urban landscape directly into the broadcasting system. The city itself has now become one enormous billboard. (This whole process eerily recalls of one of Mark Rothko's statements many decades ago. "These are not pictures," the Russian-born American painter said about his many luminous squares stacked with ineffable colour. "I have made a place.")

"In Sit You" stares the commercially saturated city in the face by upsetting the spectator's expectations in what it says and where it says it.

Early on in the process, local business people worried about a big, bad sign. The artists themselves worried about the scale of the piece that is, Borins admits,

"monumental.

"... It's not much larger than many post-World War II, post-abstract works. We even had a discussion at one point of the close link between billboard advertising and two-dimensional abstraction."

For admirers of Frank Stella's experiments with bands of explosively vivid colour, à la "Hyena Stomp" (1962), "In Sit You" will not represent much of a breakthrough other than the way it references commercial advertising, something not far from the American painter's own thinking.

But "In Sit You" could address an audience "that might be intimidated by going to a gallery," says Marman.

Superimposing established art practice with commercial design imperatives "isn't something you see all the time," she goes on. "Therefore it's almost unreal" as if, "it's in a cartoon, (so) it can't be real because there's all this colour on a sign in a beautiful park in the centre of the city."

PGODDARD@THESTAR.CA

Check out Peter Goddard's video and slide show on the visual arts at www.thestar.com/whatson

Just the facts

WHAT: "In Sit You," by Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins.
WHERE: Toronto Sculpture Garden, 115 King St. East (just past Church St.)
WHEN: Until April 15, 2007