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**Striking Oil, Artistically, in Midtown**

By DOROTHY SPEARS

If it looks as if someone just struck oil in a vacant lot near Times Square, it may be a while before you see any evidence of Texas tea.

The two 25-foot simulated oil pump jacks bobbing up and down at the southeast corner of 46th Street and Eighth Avenue are actually a new sculptural work by the New York-based artist Josephine Meckseper. An initiative by the nonprofit Art Production Fund, “Manhattan Oil Project” officially opens today and will remain on view through May 6.

By introducing pump jacks, a familiar symbol of American oil-producing towns, into a context more typically defined by eye-popping electronic billboards and dazzling lights, “I wanted to show the consequences, or the flip side, of what we actually have to do to provide all of that energy,” Ms. Meckseper, 47, said in an interview last week.

“In the worst-case scenario, it has meant that soldiers have to be dispatched to Iraq to secure the resources we need to continue,” she said.

Ms. Meckseper’s work typically addresses weighty environmental and economic issues, but in this case it also injects a much-needed dose of humor and liveliness to its immediate setting. Only a block from the heart of Times Square, her red and black sculptures are surrounded by an Irish pub, a parking lot and a crooked billboard advertising “Jesus Christ Superstar.” (The pub provided the electrical connection for the jacks’ pumping motion.)

Produced by an industrial metal fabricator who Ms. Meckseper said could just have easily produced an actual working oil pump, the sculptures nonetheless project a cool aesthetic that brings to mind the insect-like abstractions of mid-to-late 20th century modernists like Alexander Calder and Mark di Suvero.

Yet Ms. Meckseper consistently grounds her work in what she called “real political dilemmas” relating to our oil-dependent economy. “A lot of my work has dealt with the wasting of resources,” she said over tea at a brasserie across the street from the installation.

When the Bush administration began gearing up for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Ms. Meckseper, who was born in Germany but has lived in the United States for 20 years, traveled around the world filming and photographing demonstrations against the war. (A suite of five photographs depicting a rally in Berlin, “Untitled (Berlin Demonstration Series 1),” is currently on view in the exhibition “Singular Visions” at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which runs to the end of June.)

More recently, for an exhibition at the Migros Museum in Zurich, Ms. Meckseper presented a 2008 film, “0% Down,” which she describes as “a collage of car commercials, with an extremely aggressive, militaristic and also pro-oil tone.”
“It was kind of a parody,” she said, noting that on the day of the opening, several automakers declared bankruptcy.

The Zurich show created a buzz, and before long, Yvonne Force Villareal, co-founder of the Art Production Fund, was discussing a possible project with Ms. Meckseper at the Eighth Avenue site. Ms. Meckseper, who had exhibited small-scale models of oil pumps at the Migros Museum, “almost immediately suggested oil rigs on a much grander scale, and kinetic,” Ms. Villareal said.

(“Manhattan Oil Project” is presented with support from Sotheby’s and the Times Square Alliance; the Shubert Organization donated use of the site, known as Last Lot.)

Setting out to produce a pump in which “all of the details and materials were exactly to scale,” Ms. Meckseper said that she and her New York-based studio began searching for a place in the United States with a high density of oil pumps that are still working.

Her research led her to Electra, Tex. Even though the concentration of functioning pumps there was probably greater than in most other towns, she said, it had “the sense of an oil pump cemetery.”

In a landscape littered with rusted oil rigs, Ms. Meckseper began taking pictures. “It was actually quite eerie because there was nobody around,” she said.

Given that the pumps “just kind of work on their own, it really felt like a sci-fi movie,” she said, with the oil pumps as aliens casting long shadows.

For Ms. Meckseper, towns like Electra exemplify how industrial production has been outsourced to other countries, leading to job losses and forever altering the lives of individuals. “I’ve read so many stories recently where the first thing people can’t afford is their heating bill,” she said.

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On this rather dour note, Ms. Meckseper, who kept her coat on throughout our interview, looked up from her tea and gazed across Eighth Avenue, which was slick with rain.

Suddenly, the long arms of her sculptures began their simulated pumping motion. The electrical connection had been established.

“Oh, I have to go,” she said. And grabbing her umbrella, the artist rushed out with her phone to capture the first movements of her sculpture on video.