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DAILY NEWS

NOW ENTERTAINMENT

Signage of our times — billboard art

By PHYLLIS TUCHMAN
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

New Yorkers used to outdoor advertisements for laundry detergent and beer may scratch their heads when they see 15 new area billboards.

The colorful signage showcases original photographic images that have been manipulated for grand effect. Two are oddly colored snapshots from the 2001 U.S. Open tennis tournament in Queens that capture on-lookers in a half-empty Arthur Ashe stadium. The caption above another giant image claims it is of a woman in high heels having a cigarette — all viewers can see are the shoes.

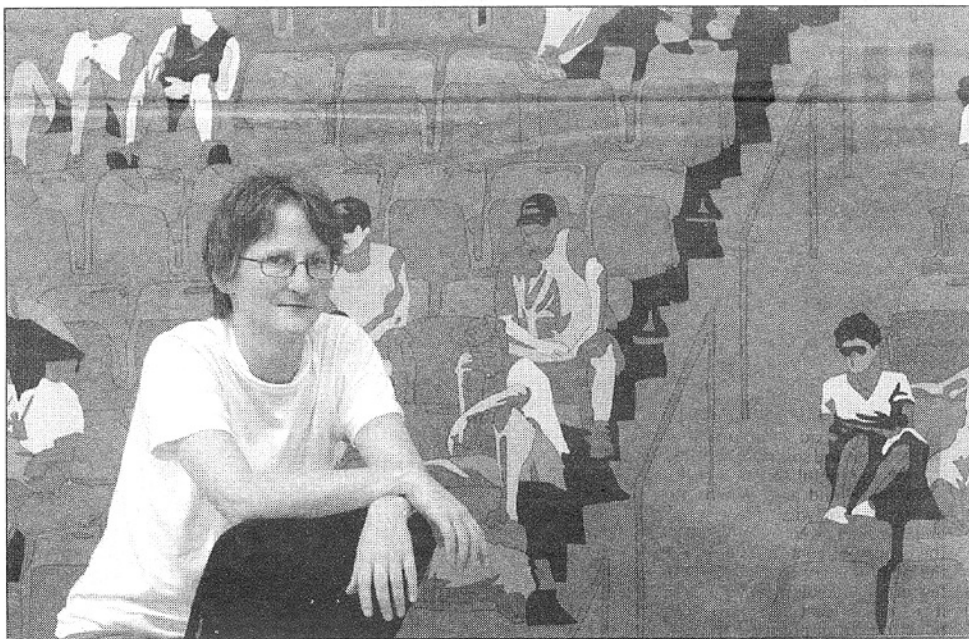
The curious pieces are all part of "Projects 77: Billboards by Sarah Morris, Julian Opie, Lisa Ruyter," an exhibition of five works each by three hot new artists.

The enterprise is the 77th in MoMA's four-decade-long "Projects" series, which, according to Judy Hecker, MoMA's assistant curator in the department of prints and illustrated books, "offers a venue for emerging artists who haven't had broad museum exposure and introduces audiences to their work."

Passersby in Queens and Manhattan will have the chance to view all of the installations today as the final billboards are put up. Each artist has four pieces in Long Island City and one in Chelsea, all of which will be on display through Dec. 1. Some will be visible to riders of the No. 7 train, others to traffic on the Long Island Expressway and the Pulaski Bridge.

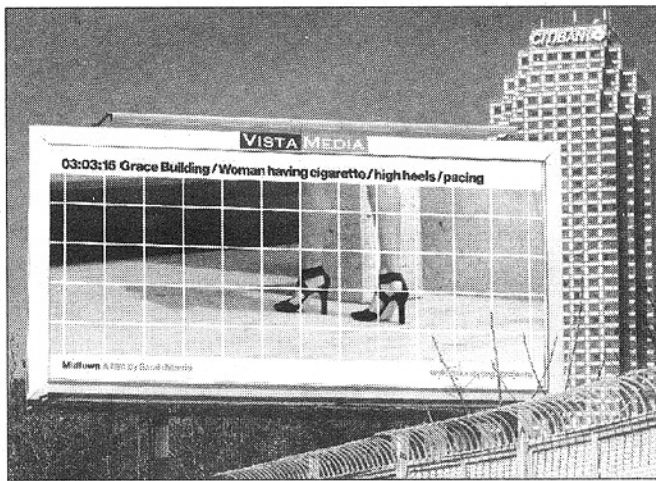
"Each of these [three] artists, in their own work, addresses the concept of urban living and the urban experience," says Hecker, who organized the project. "I wanted to see what kind of work they would [do] given the opportunity to produce something against the backdrop of the city. The three came back with very different responses, all of them intriguing."

The U.S. Open images were shot and manipulated by Ruyter, 34. Of the three artists, her works are the most colorfully vibrant — and jarring. She "paints a world in



RON ANTONELLI

COLORFUL PERSONALITY: Lisa Ruyter with a canvas in her Williamsburg loft. The artist is one of three to have five billboard-size works mounted around Manhattan and Queens as part of the MoMA "Project" series.



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PUFF PIECE: Sarah Morris' billboard of a woman "smoking," Long Island City

which everything is gaudily, cheerfully, buoyantly right and yet everything is wrong," says author Jack Miles, a Pulitzer Prize winner and a recent recipient of a MacArthur Genius Award. It's "a world flooded with light from which, nonetheless, true light has been altogether eliminated."

Norman Dubrow, a prominent collector of contemporary art, adds: "Ruyter ... takes something realistic, but makes it seem abstract. Her colors are rooted in her imagination."

Though Ruyter has had solo shows in Berlin, Vienna, Geneva and Brussels (she has one scheduled at Manhattan's Leo Koenig Gallery, beginning Nov. 5), this is her first major museum exhibition here. She studied in New York at the School of Visual Arts and at Hunter College.

Ruyter, who lives in Williamsburg, begins her paintings with photographs she has taken with her ever-present camera. She then preps a canvas with a color she hasn't used previously and projects a slide directly onto the monochromatic surface as if it were a movie screen.

After outlining the imagery to achieve a gigantic network of lines, she fills in her drawing the way others paint by numbers — but uses a variety of acidic lemons, mauves, chartreuses and other hues more frequently found in psychedelic imagery than in fine art.

While conceiving her MoMA project, Ruyter realized that "billboards are not as unlike paintings as you might think [because] you're never on top of them." As a viewer speeds by in an automobile, she points out, the works have the scale of a small picture; for subject matter, she chose "mellow New York City scenes."

For one, she used a slide she took in Coney Island; a second is based on a crowd at P.S. 1, a MoMA outpost in Queens; and a third is a view from Chelsea's London Terrace apartments. The other two are of the U.S. Open.

She paints unremarkable scenes — suburban backyards, sylvan ponds, cemetery tombstones — with an unrealistic palette and a knack for turning color conventions on their ear. As Ruyter boasts, "I wouldn't paint a stop sign red."