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ARTSEEN



Critic Doug MacCash rates New Orleans art exhibits

This one is Wonderful **Worthwhile** Whatever



CHRIS GRANGER / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Tora Lopez's St. Claude Avenue billboard of artist Kirsha Kaechele thumbs a nose at the New Orleans art establishment.

NO KIRSHA KAECHELE?

St. Claude Avenue

As if there wasn't enough arty buzz during the opening of Prospect.2 New Orleans back on Oct. 22, word spread that a series of billboards had appeared along St. Claude Avenue featuring a svelte, strawberry blonde woman in a black party dress, surrounded by the red-circle-and-slash symbol familiar from no-smoking signs.

Many onlookers identified the woman as erstwhile New Orleans art provocateur and gallery owner Kirsha Kaechele, who became a star of the post-Hurricane Katrina art community before leaving New Orleans for a new life in Tasmania, an island state of Australia.

The enigmatic St. Claude billboards were art community lightning rods. Some onlookers interpreted

them as a taunt aimed at Kaechele, whose former off-the-beaten-path art space on North Villere Street — KK Projects — was located not far from the site of the St. Claude Avenue billboards. But as it turns out, the advertisements were a satiric stunt by a frequent Kaechele collaborator, artist Tora Lopez, who titled the billboards "Currently Untitled."

"This was a piece that I conceived of and executed," Lopez said in an email. "It was created in dialogue with Kaechele and with her participation."

Lopez is loath to explain the meaning of the billboards, because, she wrote, "offering interpretation of any kind would not only limit this work, but fundamentally change it. ..." She said that "Currently Untitled" is the first part of a series.

Lopez said that Kaechele did not pay for the project. At least one of the Kaechele billboards has been replaced: look for the (possibly) remaining two-sided billboard near Bartholomew Street.

But is it art, you ask?

Definitely. From Rene Magritte to Andy Warhol to Barbara Kruger to Shepard Fairey to the anonymous maker of the "Think that you might be wrong" New Orleans street art signs, artists have toyed with the power of advertising. In 2008, Kay Rosen, one of the official Prospect.1

artists, created a poetic St. Claude Avenue billboard that read "OHNOAH." Lopez's billboards seem to playfully thumb their noses at the New Orleans art establishment, slyly pay tribute to Kaechele and fall into a long artistic tradition to boot.

Call them giant polemical portraits. Call them personalized pop art. Call me anytime you see artwork that causes such a stir.

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Prospect.2 New Orleans, the international art exhibition that continues through Jan. 29, isn't the only game in town. A handful of other avant-garde installations have popped up around the Crescent City. Read more of Doug MacCash's art news at nola.com/arts. MacCash can be reached at dmaccash@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3481. Follow him at twitter.com/DougMacCashTP.