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Billboards aren't always for automobile traffic

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Billboards are for motorists -- mostly. Situated on streets and in view of freeways, they primarily address vehicular traffic.

That's why a couple of works in the exhibition "How Many Billboards? Art In Stead" come as a surprise. The MAK Center for Art and Architecture has now unfurled all 21 artist-produced billboards high above the asphalt

in the L.A. basin (none are in the San Fernando Valley), and at least two benefit from a slower pedestrian pace.

On Beverly Boulevard just east of Western Avenue, Allan Sekula has erected a virtual ransom note. "*Los ricos destruyen el planeta*" -- the rich ones destroy the planet -- the billboard forthrightly declares, in text composed from individual letters that appear as if cut from magazines or newspapers. Framed by exclamation points, the scraps are scattered over a photograph of a crouching worker with a blow torch in hand; he has paused in his labor to look you squarely in the eye.

Needless to say, he is not among *los ricos*.

Driving by, the text and the encounter don't really read, perhaps because the scale of the letters and their color contrasts aren't stark enough. From down at the sidewalk, on the other hand, Sekula's otherwise graphically astute message stops you in your tracks. Your eyes meet the laborer's, and the billboard's pointed political work is done.



Over on Hollywood Boulevard, just west of Bronson Avenue, Christina Fernandez's pair of photographs of a battered sofa abandoned in an empty, residential neighborhood lot flow seamlessly into one another, even though the scenes were shot from different vantage points, distances and even seasons. The hilly horizon line slides directly from one image into the other, deftly registering for its

subject a poignant sense of displacement and loss over time amid the indifference of city life.

The hitch is that the billboard itself is almost obscured by the surrounding urban chatter, which includes not only other signs but swaying palm trees. Like Sekula's, Fernandez's billboard works best when encountered on foot -- which, given the increasing density of Los Angeles, might be more a sign of changing times than a defect.

--Christopher Knight



Photos: Billboards by Allan Sekula and Christina Fernandez; Credit: Christopher Knight/Los Angeles Times