

Out-spoken Art

UIC artists do billboards

By Jeff Huebner

QUESTION EVERYTHING," SAYS THE billboard at Halsted and Erie Streets, on Chicago's Near West Side. The stark, jarring statement is accompanied by the symbol of a simple black question mark against a white backdrop. While the message, designed by artist, designer and UIC associate art professor Michael Glass, is meant to question our educational system, it could apply to the adjacent billboard for Riviera cigarettes: "Men: Pleasure for Less," it says. One wonders: Less what? Less money? Less tar and nicotine? Less pain? Less life?

The ironic juxtaposition of ads and philosophic statement, on side-by-side billboards, may not have been a predetermined gambit, but it could certainly be interpreted that way. Glass is asking: when can an outdoor medium, traditionally reserved for advertising, be considered a form of artistic expression? Or, when can't it?

Glass' billboard is just one of 10, designed by 11 students, faculty, and alumni from UIC's School of Art and Design. The public-service and aesthetically-oriented messages—concerning AIDS and safe sex, safe driving, Native Americans and cultural "otherness," and art concepts—will be on the streets through the end of this month in mostly inner-city neighborhoods. (Due to scheduling and sensitive site-specificity conflicts, a billboard addressing gang activity won't go up till the first week in January.) The space has been donated by Chicago-based Patrick Media Group, one of the nation's largest outdoor advertising companies.

"We feel that this program can create an important intersection and artistic exchange among businesses, education and the city, and can benefit a wide metropolitan audience," says Karen Indeck, curator of UIC's Gallery 400, and Billboard Project coordinator. "The billboards provide an avenue into communities and a frame in which artists can address those communities in a vital new way. They're not necessarily site-specific," she adds, "but we tried to place them as strategically as possible."

Graduate student Yvette Brachman's "Kaposi's Sarcoma," for example, is on a billboard at Roosevelt and Loomis, just east of Ashland. But only the artist's name is visible on the work, which at first appears to be an abstract piece composed of black plasma-like splotches against a menacing red backdrop. It becomes powerfully suggestive of the AIDS-related dermal disease only when considered in relation to its title, which is unknown to passersby; its potential audience, of groups of young men from ABLA Homes who regularly congregate at that corner; its location, on a well-traveled westbound route to the West Side Medical Complex; and source, a close-up, color-enhanced medical textbook photo of a black male patient afflicted with Kaposi's Sarcoma.

A more "strategic" billboard, artist-alumnus Bonnie Hughes' "Between Opposites" at Union and Pershing, has a straightforward graphic style designed to make you "look now and think later," as Hughes has said. It shows the phrase "Between Opposites," highlighted in white lettering against black, and black against white. Hughes may not have intended to make a race-

based statement, but the billboard's literal positioning between two different urban worlds—predominantly white, middle-class Bridgeport to the north, and minority-dominated, economically disadvantaged communities to the south and east—naturally invokes inescapable demographic and racial associations.

Other billboards, chosen from among some 70 contest entries submitted by current art students, art and design faculty, and graduates of the school, include: alum Arturo Herrera's "Without You I'm Nothing," a deceptively simple line drawing at Ashland and Superior; grad student Sungmi Naylor's "Identifying," an Oriental-stylized work about being "other" in America, at Damen and 63rd; faculty member John Greiner's "Weapon 2," a responsible-driving message in the format of a vanity license plate, at Marshfield and Irving Park; and, at Halsted and 102nd, students Diane Lea's and Veronica Romero's "Whose Voice Was Last Sounded," a work which questions Columbus' discovery during November's American Indian Heritage Month: "Whose voice was first sounded upon this land?"

The UIC Billboard Project was also to include "Divided Colors," a "hip hop-looking" billboard addressing gang affiliation, across the street from Wells High School at Ashland and Augusta ("What you wear and how you wear it: Are you prisoner to fashion?"). Due to a scheduling oversight, however, Patrick Media told multimedia artist and adjunct assistant professor Inigo Mangano-Ovalle that a billboard spot was only available at Ashland and Ohio.

"I said, no way, we couldn't do it, because some of these kids can't even go down there," says Mangano, who worked on the design with seven at-risk youths from Wells' Schools-Within-Schools alternative-education program. "It might be only a few blocks south, but it's a whole different world in terms of [gang] codes, territories, and languages. It might've provoked something, and caused real complications by implicating a whole area. The kids'll know, the students will know what the billboard means, but somebody just cruising through wouldn't be able to read the gist of the message."

"Divided Colors" has been reserved for its original billboard site at Ashland and Augusta beginning January 5.

"It was important that the billboards be all over the city," explains UIC's Indeck. "We'd been trying to think of a way of becoming more community-involved, to not just be an entity unto ourselves, but to be able to make an impact on the city. The project really has to do with issues of making the public aware that we are here, doing community service, and how important public art is to the community. And Patrick thought it was just a wonderful idea."

"We did it out of the kindness of our hearts," says Patrick Sales Manager Lesiotis. "We wanted to give something back to the community, and to give artists the opportunity to express themselves. It allows people to put something on the street where it can be seen by other people. We also wanted to create some awareness that we don't just do cigarette and tobacco ads, for example, but that we're doing stuff for the community."