

WWD TUESDAY

June 1, 2004

Ready-to-Wear/Textiles

Coney Island's Art Invasion

NEW YORK — Coney Island, Brooklyn's fabled but worn mecca of sea, sand and amusements, is getting some airbrushing.

Twenty-five artists are redesigning arcade signs, murals and the facades of some rides in the neighborhood that holds memories for so many people. The Jones Arcade, dime toss and fortune-teller's booth are among the 35 sites being spiffed up with pop art and other eye-catching designs that will debut June 12.

Aside from being able to Skee Ball and grab a hot dog at Nathan's Famous, artists embraced the opportunity to dust off the landmark. The backdrops of Shoot the Freak or The Spider aren't exactly the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but Coney Island's history has an irresistible lure.

Artist Steve Powers, who whipped up the concept, said, "Coney Island is like remembering a really tough childhood. You remember some of the good, but it's really not a pretty place. It's beautiful because of its toughness."

Powers presented his idea to Creative Time, a nonprofit organization here that promotes art in public spaces, which in turn recruited the band of emerging and established artists. His handiwork includes Marvel Comics-type graphics for the renowned Cyclone roller coaster. The way Powers tells it, the project is a bit of a valentine to the seaside place from which he has long drawn inspiration.

"I've depleted so much from Coney Island, I needed to replenish it," Powers said. "Like some ideas, this one spiraled out of control. But what I liked about this project was how grassroots it was. It didn't really require a lot of technology, just a lot of enthusiasm from many different people."



Katrin Jurati's sign for the balloon game, top, and Steve Powers' artwork on the Cyclone.

Hence, The Dreamland Artist Club was born, named after the Coney Island amusement park that burned down in 1911. Later this month, The Dreamland Artist Club T-shirts will be sold at Alife and other hip specialty stores here to benefit Creative Time.

Like Walker Evans, Rem Koolhaas and Woody Allen before them, the artists were inspired by Coney Island's unique brand of Americana. Adam Cvijanovic, who dressed up the sign for the water gun game with images of hopping blue rabbits, described Coney Island as "the proto Vegas." As "the last little slice of what New York was like 40 or 50 years ago," many artists were drawn to the place's nostalgia as well as its "melancholy because it's not what it once was," he said.

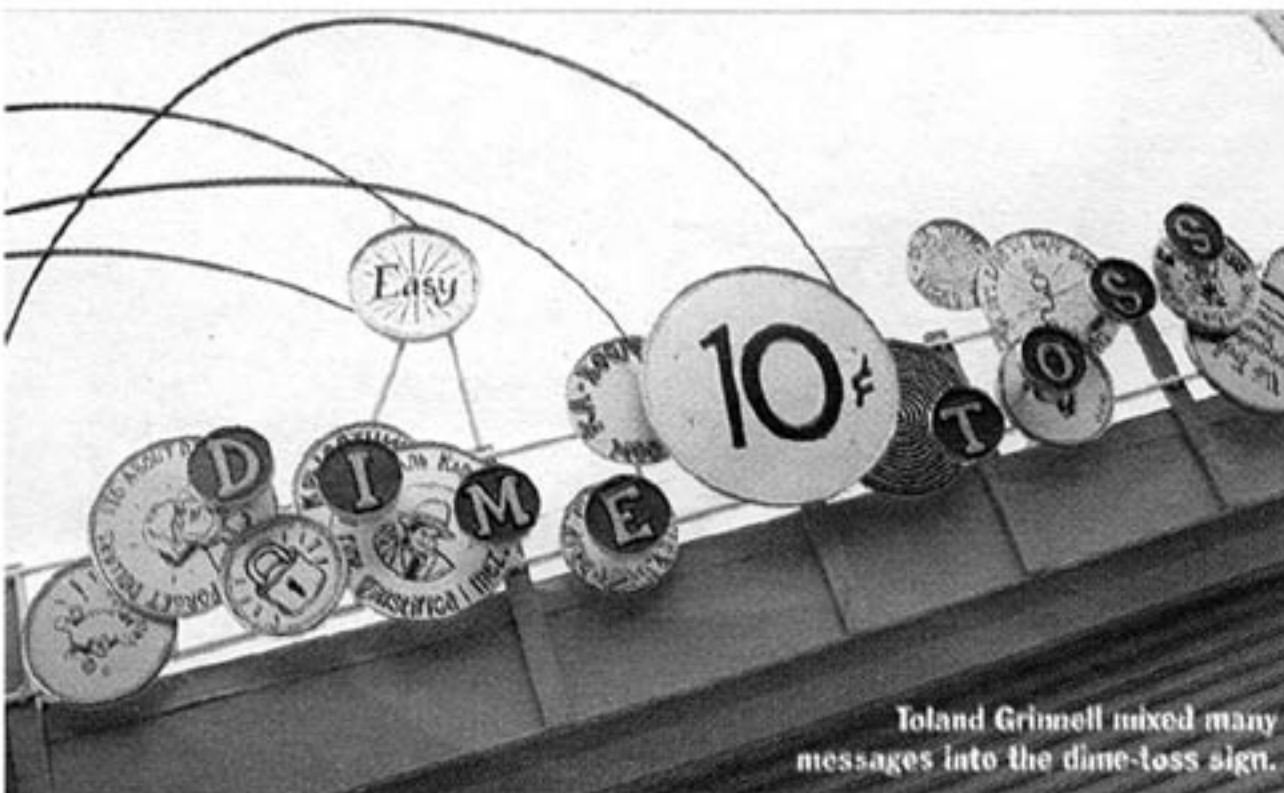
Others found surprises along the way. Ellen Harvey approached the fortune-teller about making a sign for her booth. "She told me, 'What I really need is a booth,'" Harvey laughed. "She decided what she needed, and I decided to abandon my artistic ego."

So Harvey went to work and created an 18th-century-inspired bordello with a fake marble floor, Empire furniture and images of Taro cards on the walls.

Ryan McGinness, an avid arcade fan who has a Ms. PacMan video game in his studio, said he was jazzed about redesigning the Jones Arcade with its Skee Ball and prize machines. "It's a cool place and an unusual place for a public art project," he said.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Toland Grinnell said he "perked up" when he heard about the project and signed himself up. As a nod to the car racing near Coney Island, Grinnell painted an image of "Big Daddy" Ed Roth, an icon of American hot-rodding. Russian prisoner tattoos, Brooklyn slang, Al Capone and Latin Bible sayings are also mixed into the work. Grinnell also plays up "dropping dimes" as in the expression for snitching on criminals. Visionaire magazine is so impressed with his sign it plans to feature it in a future edition, he said.

—R.F.



Toland Grinnell mixed many messages into the dime-loss sign.