

# Time Out New York

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# PAINTED LOVE

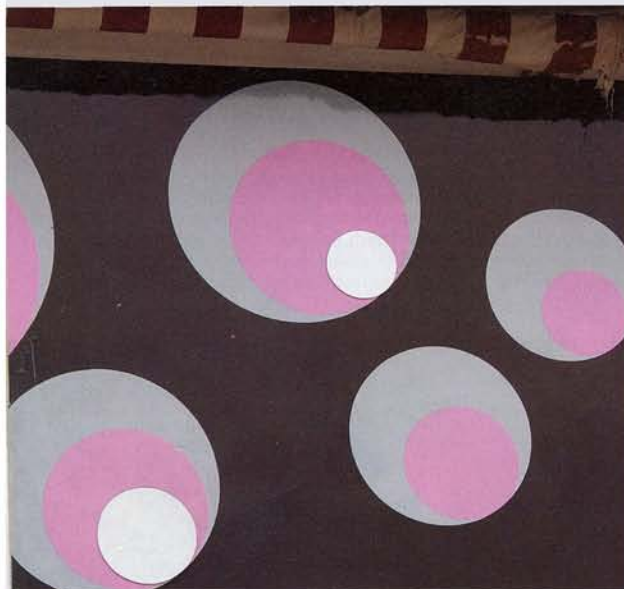
A posse of artists gives props to old Coney Island with a show of splashy new signs  
By **Linda Yablonsky**  
Photographs by **Sarina Finkelstein**

**D**isregard for a moment the impressive new subway station and the plans for a seaside mall. With Times Square dressed in corporate splendor and Harlem gentrifying fast, Coney Island is one of the last classic destinations in New York to retain its old-time grit. Between the Cyclone and the Parachute Jump, the hucksters and the suckers, the area's dilapidated streets and dim arcades offer plenty of faded character, but they haven't seen much fresh color lately.

Enter the Dreamland Artist Club. Founded last year by graffiti legend Steve Powers and Creative Time, a nonprofit producer of public art projects, the "club" is a loose amalgam of street and gallery artists who have made hand-painted signs for mom-and-pop amusement stands that couldn't otherwise afford them. Last year, the project resulted in contributions from 25 artists, advertising everything from ice cream and bumper cars to the Dime Toss and the Spider. Most are still in place. ▶



Art



**BEACH BRIGADE** Coney Island visitors can check out this mural by Os Gemeos; a new sign for Plaza Latina by Bruno Peinado, above; or an image for the Water Racing booth by Beatriz Barral, left.

This year, Creative Time curator Alexa Coyne negotiated the placement of 17 new signs for the amusement park, including a 130-foot-long Coney Island-themed mural by Os Gemeos, the Brazilian twins who painted the wall opposite the new Coney Island–Stillwell Avenue subway entrance. “This isn’t a gentrification or renewal project,” says Powers, who got the idea three years ago when he discovered that the bulk of Coney Island’s traditional signage had disappeared or been replaced by the kind designed on a computer. “We’re not planting trees, just putting out information. If the signs make the place more crazy, that’s the artists doing their job.”

One of the peculiarities of public art is that, though it intrudes on a landscape, once it’s installed, passersby tend not to notice it. And if all goes well, when the Dreamland “exhibition” officially opens on Saturday 18, many visitors won’t be able to tell what’s art and what’s not. “For me, it’s a measure of success if the public doesn’t recognize the signs as art,” says Anne Pasternak, director of Creative Time. “They’re paintings, but they’re also advertising, and deliberately pose questions about the role of art as commodity.”

Indeed, with its cartoony lettering and pink-and-purple color scheme, a new marquee announcing Digital Passport Photos on Surf Avenue seems a likely Dreamland creation—but it turns out to have been painted by Mike Suriano, the 26-year-old son of the shop’s owner. Another sign, for the Balloon Water Race, looks generic but is actually the work of artist Greg Lamarche, who also painted the tunnel under the boardwalk to Deno’s kiddie park. Gary Panter’s sign for the

Russian-owned Surf Art Exchange is as crude and scraggly as *Jimbo in Purgatory*, his underground comic.

Most of the businesses involved are along Jones Walk or Bowery Street; maps are available at the Dreamland Artist Clubhouse on Surf Avenue. The artists chose their own sites and were free to paint whatever they liked, as long as they included the business name. (The exception is Ronnie Cutrone’s cartoon-food sign over Bernard’s Snack House.) One of the most elaborate signs is a plasma-cut number over the Balloon Dart Game, which includes sculpted cutouts of the Man in the Moon and the Cyclone. “I tend to overdo it,” says Swoon, the formally trained 21-year-old street artist who created it. Game owner Jimmy Carchiolo thinks it’s “gorgeous.”

But if such paintings draw more people to the stands, they’re not necessarily good for business. “The people who come to see the art don’t play the game,” says the owner of Skin the Wire, who declined to give his name. Nevertheless, he liked the sign Nicole Eisenman made for his booth last year so much that he carefully stored it, along with a couple of neighboring signs, for the winter and reinstalled them himself. Other booth proprietors will likely follow suit in October, when Coney Island closes itself down and many of the newly painted signs will go into storage until the weather gets warm again.

Creative Time’s Coyne thinks the art has produced a halo effect. “I’ve noticed business owners fixing things up,” she says. “The signs have been a motivating factor.” As for Powers, his goal now is the same as it was when he worked only in the street: “To make the world a different place,” he says. “Not necessarily a better one.” ■