

Jeulet Solo's colorful creations are a gas

Neon artist designs signs of the times on trendy shops

By Hunter Drohojowska

Anyone keeping track of developments along Melrose Avenue has noticed the proliferation of the most popular of advertising devices: neon signs. Karat Carats, Comme Les Garçons, L.A. Concord — boutiques of varying function and size — all bear signs designed

by Jeulet Solo. In fact, the people who run Body Express so appreciated Solo's initial sign for the front of their health facility, they continue to commission her neon work for the interior and exterior.

Solo, 34, who works out of a studio near Washington and La Brea, fits one's exotic preconceptions of a neon designer/artist: She is tall and thin, with long dark rumpled hair and dark eyes. Her bright pink lipstick matches an oversize floral shirt, which she wears with black stretch pants and white boots. Although she has been in the business for only 2½ years, she estimates she's designed "between 40 and 50" signs.

Solo designed the neon signs for Atomic Age and King's Croissant in West Hollywood, as well as a neon portrait of Bob Marley commissioned by the Museum of Rock Art. "There's been a neon revival in the past few years," she says. "Particularly since it's a good form of advertising."

Solo uses odd typefaces and bright, tropical colors; she's working for clients who want novelty, not convention. "Most of the work I get is by referrals," she says. "When I started, there were fewer freelance neon artists. Primarily, people had to get neon from sign shops. Now more people are trying to break into the field."

In fact, some of the novice neon designers are coming to Solo for lessons. She teaches a private six-week course in her studio for \$160, and laughs when she admits she's educating her competition. She's well aware of the irony: Solo competes with her own teacher, Richard Jenkins, co-founder, with Lili Lakitch, of the Museum of Neon Art in downtown L.A.

The designer, whose real name is Judith Jeulet Saullo, pronounced "solo," had been working in administration in the music business for several years when she decided to try something new. "I wanted to work with my mind and with my hands," she explains. Although her



Jeulet Solo left her position in the music industry 2½ years ago because, she says, "I wanted to work with my mind and with my hands." She became a neon artist and has since designed about four dozen signs, many for the trendy boutiques on Melrose.

right hand is deformed, she has not found it a handicap and adds, "All of the years I wasn't working in a creative field, I never put much emphasis on it anyway. As I came into having to use my hands in my work, I had no problem with it. And that was real exciting, the confirmation that it never inhibited me."

Working with clients, either using their ideas or suggesting her own, she comes up with a "neon pattern." "There is a specific visual language that's used to designate different bends and turns," she says. These patterns are then sent

out to a studio, either Pete Kutlenios, or a shop called Alert, where the glass is bent into shape and the neon and argon gases are added. Glass-bending is such a precise and complicated craft that neon artists rarely do it themselves.

After the glass is bent, Solo assembles the parts into a finished product, often combining the glass tubes with plexiglass or other materials. If she is creating a "portable," a sign for an interior space, she can attach it to a transformer and install it herself. An exterior sign must be mounted by someone with

Handmade

Fourth in a series

an electrical contracting license. The price depends on the amount of glass tubing used: It may range from \$400 for a small sign up to thousands of dollars for more elaborate concoctions.

Solo has designed neon backgrounds or accessories for set designs for music videos by the Motels, "The Top" with Cyndi Lauper and the Romantics, and the American Video Awards. In addition, she is responsible for the video on KTLA's "Kids, Incorporated" and signs appearing in Mel Brooks' "To Be or Not to Be."

She says her art "differs greatly" from her commercial work. In one corner of the studio, a straight tube of variegated neon, formerly used as a "color chart," leans against other pieces of neon and sticks of bamboo in what she calls a "neon teepee." At the base of the structure are some boulders, a combination of artificial and natural materials reminiscent of the environmental art of Italian artist Mario Merz. "I like the idea of not overcomplicating an art piece," says Solo, "because the neon is dominant. For my art, I prefer to use less intense, paler colors, as opposed to the very bright ones used in signage. I like to work with gases that aren't used in signs: argon, xenon, krypton. They are dim as opposed to bright."

Although Solo has found her commercial work to be an ideal way to support herself, she now intends to pursue her own art further. "It takes time to get recognition in a way that you personally find pleasing," she says. "The way people interpret your work is sometimes very different from what you personally feel. Through my work, I'm becoming more the person I really am. Therefore, my personal work will continue to change."

Hunter Drohojowska writes frequently about art for the Herald.

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