



Mike Sergieff/Herald photographer

"I use advertising as a medium the way other people use bronze or paint," says Les Levine, standing in front of a mock-up of one of his five billboards in the City of Industry which will be on view for one month.

Levine's one artist who gets his message across

Billboards are his newest canvas

By Hunter Drohojowska

Who's Who in American Art lists New York artist Les Levine as the "founder of media art."

As such he called a press conference yesterday — attended by one reporter — to announce his latest project: five eye-catching billboards carrying his satirical message to City of Industry motorists.

The billboards, which face west on Valley Boulevard between Fairway Drive and Nogales Street (behind an ad for Dewar's Scotch), begin with a cartoon-like image of a red reindeer and the single word "Aim." The next billboard depicts a gray horse standing still and the word "Race." The third shows a steam shovel picking up a load of wheat and the word "Take." The fourth is a painting of a gray institutional building and the word "Steal." The final billboard features a group of gray elephants, standing together as background to

ing stretch of road is peppered with other conventional billboards barking everything from Hormel Chili to vacations in Las Vegas.

"I use advertising as a medium the way other people use bronze or paint," said Levine, 48, during the conference at Foster and Kleiser, the company which donated the billboard space — worth \$390 per month, per sign — to Levine's sponsor, the L.A. Institute of Contemporary Art.

The Dublin-born Levine said it was his intention to blend his work into the environment, advancing his statements subliminally to the thousands of drivers who pass daily.

"I'm using the media of advertising to bring artwork to the public," said Levine, who became irked in the back lot of Foster and Kleiser's painting studios because a mock-up of the billboard "Race" had "public service message" written across its

bottom. "The purpose is confused if Foster and Kleiser use it to advertise themselves." But as he spoke, a painter climbed a ladder and began whitening out the offensive line while a public-relations spokeswoman hustled over to assure him that they would remove the line on the other billboards, as well.

Appeased, Levine said, "The idea is that someone will pass by on the highway, for several days, and have different notions of what they're seeing. First they may think that the image of the horse is about horse racing. Seeing it again, they may think it's about something else. The intention is that the person will come to a conclusion based on the way their mind works. It will be more effective if they don't think it's art. If they think it's art, they might think it's boring. It's better if they think it's advertising. By using a system that's familiar, (like advertising) they're open to letting in information that they would normally close out."

Levine has painted the images in an appealing, childlike style that belies the political thrust of the billboards, which for him represent "five integral poisons in our culture at the moment."

"'Aim' is about aggression, and war. 'Race' is racing to get ahead, and now that we've brought in the computers, things will go faster. On another level, it's the race among races. When you say black, yellow or brown race, it implies that one group is out in front of another. Like a horse race. 'Take' means using natural resources, expressing greed, taking from the earth. 'Steal,' next to the image of an institution, implies that major corporations have invented a new form of theft. Individuals stealing, coming before a judge, is minor in comparison to major corporate stealing. And 'Forget' means to remember. In order to deal with everything that's going on, you have to forget. This is a reminder to memory. We used to have an historical view but with all this information processing, it seems hopeless to think that there can be any past in the future. We're too busy coping with information, with our news at the moment, to delve into the past."

Levine's personal appearance — conservative navy suit, rose-and-green striped tie, graying hair cropped close — is as deceptively moderate as the surface of his billboards. He looks more like a businessman than one of New York's most notorious artists.

In fact, his billboards are signed "The New Museum of Mott Art, Inc." the name for his Mott Street studio in Chinatown. He incorporated in 1969 because he thought that "the artist in the late 20th-century would be dealing with business systems. But just as business looks at art as cute and coy, I don't think business is serious. I think art is serious."

This series of billboards was also erected in Minneapolis and Chicago last year. In 1982, he received considerable attention when he took over premium advertising space in New York subway trains for posters of an Oriental boy and girl with the declaration "We Are Not Afraid" beneath them. In the past he recreated chopsticks used by Chou En-Lai and Richard Nixon in enormous neon, and also produced a vast array of "Watergate Fashions": drawings of what every member of the Senate Watergate Committee and its witnesses were wearing throughout each day of the 1973 hearings. Politics provides the foundation on which his art has been built.

"Politics could be the new Christianity. If properly considered and used, it has the ability to alleviate human suffering," he said. "I want (the billboards) to give people some insights in the way society works. More than anything, I want to say to people, 'Have no fear.' My work is about freedom of the individual mind. We don't think advertising has a physical effect on us. But if you're anxious about your hair, your body odor, living in the wrong place, it produces stress. I think the idea that you can't get people to buy things unless you make them anxious is delinquent and uncivic-minded. I see the artist's role as serving the public. I'm a public servant. Each of the billboards, while they represent the notion of societal poisons, the words also imply the antidotes: 'Don't race, don't take, don't aim, don't steal, don't forget.'"

The billboards will remain in their current location for one month.