



## Print Article



Vandana Jain's *The Ice Cream Booth* for the Dreamland Artist Club, 2005



Vandana Jain's *Chakra: NBC-Yamaha* (2002)



Clive Murphy's *Gangster Cigars* for the Dreamland Artist Club, 2005



Clive Murphy's *What It's Like To Be Me* at New Contemporaries, 2005

# SIGNS OF THE TIMES by Ben Davis

Out at Coney Island, on a weekday afternoon, the August sun devours the streets. It's like a ghost town, with shambling newspapers and discarded junk food containers instead of tumbleweeds. The weekend crowds have ebbed, leaving its decayed, shipwrecked surfaces exposed to gleam in the heat, its rides sleepwalking on without much purpose. Half the attractions are shuttered.

It's a tough and quietly dramatic place. If you run a Google news search on Coney Island, the top stories are the bailout of the park's last, historic carousel, and a fire at the Luna Park housing complex.

Into this context comes the Dreamland Artist Club, a kind of sign-painting project spearheaded by the graffiti artist Steve Powers, June 18-Oct. 30 2005. Powers and several other artists have planted 17 works along a few blocks on Jones Walk, Surf Ave, Bowery and Stillwell Avenue, as well as opening a "Clubhouse" that serves as a sign-painting studio and welcome center for the community. The project is sponsored by Creative Time, and is in its second year.

The Dreamland signs fit in well with the carnival advertising and kitsch on Coney Island's disheveled midway. Clive Murphy's sign for the Gangster Cigar shop features two tommy guns along with black letters on a red background. A snazzy marquee by Vandana Jain advertises ice cream and cold soda. The signs look like they've been there since time immemorial. The eye slides right over them, their cheerful but unassuming colors serving as a simple background for cargos of drooping balloons and bright "Finding Nemo" plush dolls.

This is as it is intended to be. Powers specifically conceived of the Dreamland Artist Club as an exercise in recovering the lost and low-tech art of hand-painted signs, rather than as a display for artistic individuality. Thus, participating artists such as Murphy and Jain -- both of whom have, in the past, done artworks that transform and critique consumer imagery, Murphy with installations featuring packing materials, Jain with mandala-like paintings of company logos -- were required to conform strictly to business needs of the various establishments, working with the codes of the Coney Island setting.

This environment does not always return the favor. For instance, Gary Panter, who is known for his freaked-out punk cartoon style, contributes a billboard for the Surf Art Exchange that seems almost nostalgic when contextualized as advertising. The veteran figurative artist Mimi Gross contributes a painting of a silently staring crowd standing in front of Coney Island rides, rendered using her customary rough, colored lines on black background; it is almost lost above an ice cream parlor.

The young artist Isca Greenfield-Sanders, on the other hand, was compelled by the demands of the project to forego her usual



Cary Panter's *The Art Exchange* for the Dreamland Artist Club, 2005



**Gary Panter**  
*Crusher*  
2004  
Dunn and Brown Contemporary



Mimi Gross' *Plaza Mexico USA* for the Dreamland Artist Club, 2005



**Mimi Gross**  
*Sara and Rebekah, Fishers Island*  
2001-2002  
Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

nuanced, photographic depictions of family idylls in favor of a brushy painting of a zipping biplane above a booth called Happy Landings.

Artists who have in the past attempted to swallow the gallery with their ambition, or make their art up into carnival size, here in turn allow themselves to be swallowed by the carnival. Bruno Peinado, who installed a huge, multicolored puzzle toy installation at Paris' Palais de Tokyo in 2004 -- something that might have been right at home on the Coney Island beach -- is limited here to a comparatively humble pink-on-black sign for Plaza Latina on Surf Ave, featuring a chaotic pattern of interlocking geometric and animal shapes.

Beatriz Barral created a walk-in funhouse environment at Parker's Box in Brooklyn in 2003. For the Dreamland project, her slick, flag-like icons above the Water Racing booth are half-obsured by unkempt, decaying tatters of awning. The same is true for Swoon, who has received good reviews for her summer installation of an urban environment filled with ghost-like cutout characters at Deitch Projects in SoHo. At the Balloon Dart Game booth at Coney Island, her sign -- among the most ambitious -- appears rather faded next to Taco Bell and Pizza Hut ads.

One could say that the most radical thing about the art of the Dreamland Artist Club is its humility. It is radically respectful of its context.

In his book *Displaying the Marvelous*, art historian Lewis Kachur writes about Salvador Dalí's pavilion for the 1939-40 New York World's Fair exhibition in Flushing. Bringing together crustacean-like Surrealist-inspired architecture with a tank of semi-nude girls dressed as mermaids in Dalí-designed suits, the project was an attempt, Kachur writes, to bring in the "Vogue and Harper's Bazaar set" along with the "hoi polloi." The pavilion was a belly flop. Attendance for the attraction was disappointing at the same time that the thrills of "Jungle Land" and "Rose's Aquacade" thrived. Dalí's backers went into bankruptcy and the artist went back to Europe. American popular culture had out avant-garded the great avant-gardist.

The Dreamland Artist Club turns this scenario inside-out. Powers' attempted synergy between cutting-edge art and street-fair culture is designed to celebrate the minor status of Coney Island's dated attractions in the face of overwhelming digitalized mass culture. For this reason, Dreamland's project has a down-to-earth big-heartedness that is especially appealing.

But one shouldn't miss the subtext, either. Dreamland's matter-of-factness can't help but point to the crushing irrelevance of contemporary art's irony and intellectualism to the working class African-American, Latino and Russian people who come to Coney Island. And by restricting the project's esthetic, Powers' has done little to attract the dollars of the "Vogue and Harper's Bazaar set" to these faded businesses. The irreconcilable paradox of art's relation to class is the elephant that sits in the corner of the Dreamland Artist Club.

Indeed, the specter of gentrification haunts the whole enterprise, with the artists uncomfortably cast as advance guard for a Times-Square-style corporate makeover of Coney Island, accelerating the land grab that has already begun in the area. Such a turn of events would almost certainly mean the death of the low-key attractions that currently occupy the site.



Isca Greenfield-Sanders' *Happy Landings* for the Dreamland Artist Club, 2005



Isca Greenfield-Sanders  
*Blue Picnic*  
2003  
Galerie Bernd Klüser



Bruno Peinado's *Plaza Latina* for the Dreamland Artist Club, 2005



Bruno Peinado's *Good Stuff* at Palais de Tokyo, 2004



Beatriz Barral's *Water Racing* for the Dreamland Artist Club, 2005

This, it seems, is why Powers has to avoid anything controversial or spectacular -- nothing as crowd-pleasing as, say, the rotating, mirror-coated horse that Peinado installed outdoors in Paris in 2004. The very interest in the area that such a thing would attract would disturb the fragile balance that Powers is trying to preserve.

And so the project's esthetic is uniquely contradicted, both wanting and not wanting your attention. Dreamland affirms the place just as it is, frozen in the past, eaten away by a present that renders ever more irrelevant its caste of small entertainment entrepreneurs and their attractions that haven't changed or grown any more sophisticated in 50 years; "Hit the freak," a man rasps out along the boardwalk. "Live human target. Hit the freak in the head."

Dreamland is an ongoing project, and there is no telling what the good intentions of Powers and his artists can accomplish. For now, however, its contributions have a feeling of a sweetly elegiac coda, not of a new beginning.

As I was leaving, I stopped at one of the booths to ask the proprietor if I could see one of the artist-designed decks of cards that I had heard I could win there.

"We keep 'em over there," the man said gruffly, gesturing to the locked booth next door. "You know why? When people win, I tell 'em they won the art cards -- but all they want to know about is the electric scooter."

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Beatriz Barral's *SUPERACCESSPACE* at Parker's Box, 2003



Swoon's *Balloon Dart Game* for the Dreamland Artist Club, 2005



Swoon's *Untitled* at Deitch Projects, 2005