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Road art is coming Saturday to a billboard near I-195

By Katherine Calos | TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

If art were as big as a billboard, would you look? You'll know on Saturday when the Billboard Project takes over a digital sign beside Interstate 195, near where it meets Interstate 64. You'll see it if you drive north on I-195 near Westwood Avenue. About 2,800 images provided by 33 artists from as far as Thailand will rotate through three eight-hour cycles, with each image appearing for about 10 seconds at a time.

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David Morrison got the idea when he saw the area's first electronic billboards in the testing phase about five years ago. Instead of ads, they showed screensaver photos of nature. He liked it.

"It had a nice, pleasant feel when I drove by," he said. He contacted Lamar Advertising and found that he could rent a billboard for \$2,850 a day. Because he was able to rent only one side of the billboard on the day he wanted, his bill is \$1,425. Morrison decided to consider it an investment in performance art, calling it "Yet Another Roadside Attraction." He says he would like to continue the project in other parts of the country.

"It's happening here because it can," he said. "It started here because I live here. It's advertising space, and I wanted to turn it into something other than that. Essentially it's an installation piece that I want to put up in Richmond."

Morrison sent a message to several local artists and asked them to spread it around. He ended up

with a dozen artists from the New York area, nine from Richmond and others scattered from Chicago to Houston to California to Thailand. None of them will be paid, but they don't have to chip in on the cost, either.

Their art ranges from landscape photography to graffiti-influenced drawings to changing segments of a charcoal sketch. The first image is by Top Changtrakul of Bangkok, who pasted together letters to say "Good art can be shown anywhere, even in a place like this."

Nicole Tschampel is one of the New Yorkers who'll be here to see it in person. She got so excited that she put together 164 images for the project. Setting the stage will be her "You Are Here" series that begins with the universe and drills down to a view of the billboard from the ground.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Tschampel said. "For New York artists, it's easy to be incredibly myopic about how to present your work. You're surrounded by large institutions, by galleries. What makes this appealing, it reaches people that may never enter those spaces. It's a very public way of getting your work out for the world to see.

"It's also totally bizarre. Most opportunities for artists revolve around setting up work in a space, and people looking at it in their own time. If they don't want to look at it, they don't."

"The primary audience for this is going to be people in their cars. They're unsuspecting. They've got three to five seconds of viewing time before they pass it. It's also a fascinating challenge, how to make something that can communicate effectively that quickly. It's such a unique opportunity to engage with the public."

Stuart Williamson, an account executive for Lamar Advertising of Richmond, said the company viewed the idea as an opportunity to show what the digital signs can do.

"It was a unique question to see how many images we could actually handle for our digital billboard," he said. .

Six advertisers usually share time on Lamar's digital billboards, with each ad displayed for 10 seconds before the next ad appears. At the I-195 location, most drivers have seven to nine seconds to read an ad before they have driven past it.

"Lamar's first question was why," Williamson said. "It's just a unique concept. We worked with David and were able to pull it off. This is a first on all aspects."

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