

Sign Language

Last fall, along a 60-mile stretch of Interstate 10 near Jacksonville, Florida, motorists accustomed to the usual enticements that billboards offer—outlet malls, glistening burgers, budget motels—may have noticed something out of the ordinary. Ten billboards depicted historical scenes from the Age of Exploration, ranging from a painting of pre-Spanish Florida to a 17th-century etching of European ships approaching the shore. They were like centuries-old ads promoting the New World, set starkly against the real thing.

These images, produced by artist **Shana Lutker**, kicked off “The Manifest Destiny Billboard Project,” a rotating series of artist-designed billboards organized by the Los Angeles Nomadic Division, or LAND. By the time it is completed next year, the project will have totaled 100 billboards spread across nearly 2,500 miles of road from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts.

“I’m obsessed with going West—the idea of re-creation of selfhood, of starting over,” says **Zoe Crosher**, who is curating the project with LAND director **Shamim M. Momin**. The pair recruited ten artist-explorers, including **Mario Ybarra Jr.**, **Sanford Biggers**, and **John Baldessari**, to mark the cross-continental journey with roughly ten billboards each. Like a sped-up rendition of westward expansion, “Manifest Destiny” will gain ground every other month until it reaches Los Angeles next spring.

True to the billboard form, several artists adopted the trappings of outdoor advertising (blown-up images,



Mario Ybarra Jr., *Barrio Aesthetics*, 2013. Ybarra’s photographic billboards in Mobile, Alabama, depicted scenes from Los Angeles’s Latino community.

splashy text) for their own ends. Ybarra’s enlarged photos, mounted on signboards in Mobile, Alabama, offered glimpses of life in L.A.’s Latino neighborhoods, from a group of mariachi players to a girl in a *quinceañera* dress at a salad bar.

Biggers’s billboards, currently on view in New Orleans, incorporate photos from a recent trip to the Afar region of Ethiopia, where he saw volcanoes, salt flats, mountains, and ancient stone churches. The artist notes a

connection between Ethiopia’s plans to develop Afar and westward momentum in the United States. “I’m interested in the notion of the expansion of a country and how that entails a certain amount of romanticism,” Biggers says, “very much like Manifest Destiny, with all of its good and bad.”

In May, **Eve Fowler** will set phrases culled from the writings of **Gertrude Stein** against brightly colored backgrounds in Houston. Stein’s cryptic lines (“a spectacle and

nothing strange,” “this is it with it as it is”) will read like a playful running commentary on more familiar roadside refrains such as “Exit now,” “Jesus is Lord,” and “We bare all.”

Given the vastness of “The Manifest Destiny Billboard Project,” even the most ambitious viewer could understandably become overwhelmed by it. Still, says Momin, “I hope some crazy person decides that they’re going to see the whole thing. You never know.”

—**Lamar Anderson**