

CALENDAR



Pictures of 130 billboards from the middle of the 20th century are on display at the Take My Picture gallery. Many of them show slices of vintage Americana.

BY RICHARD GUZMÁN
CITY EDITOR

They're just about everywhere in Los Angeles — on streets as you walk, near freeways as you zoom by, on buildings as you look up. Billboards are omnipresent, selling or promoting just about anything you need and a lot that you don't.

The billboard glut has sparked a controversy in recent years, but in a new Downtown Los Angeles exhibit, they are not out to advertise or stir up trouble. Instead, they are being considered as works of art and historical snapshots of the city.

The Billboard Show: Selling the So-Cal Lifestyle, opened June 13 at Take My Picture, a photo gallery owned by Gary Leonard (Leonard is a photographer for *Los Angeles Downtown News*, among other publications). The show runs through the summer and features 130 photographs of billboards from the 1950s and '60s erected by the Pacific Outdoor billboard company, which is now CBS Outdoor.

About 30 images are displayed on the walls of the Broadway gallery, while the rest appear in a slideshow on a flat-screen television.

"The colors are still amazing," Leonard said. "There's art and history in each frame."

Full of bright hues reminiscent of comic book art, and emblazoned with pop-art-like images, the billboards were captured by Pacific Outdoor photographers in locations throughout the city. Unlike today's billboards, which are usually photographs and sometimes electronic signs, the billboards of a half century ago were actual illustrations, Leonard said.

The images in the show depict slices of vintage Americana, and appear to have been aimed at the nuclear family. They show smiling men in suits, conservative women and happy children eager to try whatever particular goods are being sold.

Phoenix, who has chronicled the era through his retro slide shows and coffee table books. "You get to see L.A. 50 years ago and it was a very different place."

One billboard in the show features a gray-haired man smoking and looking over his shoulder. "Mildness Makes the Difference," reads the ad for Tareyton cigarettes. Another ad for the same cigarette reads "Go Dodgers Go" and has a shot of a pack cigarettes with star pitcher Sandy Koufax smiling on the side.

One billboard shows two smiling girls eating Oreo cookies and changing the television channel by hand, with the legend "Switch to Oreo." In an ad for New Blue Chevron Supreme Gasoline, a man in a white shirt, black bow tie and white hat is next to the words "The Big Step Ahead," a sight that harkens back to the days when full service was a regular part of visiting a gas station.

"It tells us so much about where we've been," Leonard said of the exhibit.

Saving History

Leonard acquired the images from Rick Robinson, a former executive with the advertisement company. Robinson wanted to save what he saw as a historic treasure.

While the company donated several images through the years to various organizations, some fell by the wayside and were either discarded or forgotten in storage.

"There was a treasure trove of old slides that were hidden away," Robinson said. "When I worked at the company over the last 15 years through several different owners, I kept rescuing them. I even jumped in the dumpster in a suit to get some."

Aware of Leonard's reputation as someone who has documented the history of Los Angeles in his pictures (in addition to shooting for various publications, Leonard's photos of Los Angeles neighborhoods have been displayed in the Central

Library), Robinson offered him some of the images, which were in the form of Kodachrome slides.

"When people look at it they feel like they do when they go to an old diner and remember the old days back to the '50s. It echoes the sentiment, the optimism of post-war America," Robinson said.

Just Ads

Billboards have come a long way since then.

In the past few years an explosion of outdoor advertising has led to acrimony and lawsuits. Recently, city leaders have been debating an ordinance that would limit the display of electronic billboards and supergraphics, the multi-story advertisements that frequently appear on the sides of buildings. The ordinance has been placed on hold until August so that incoming City Attorney Carmen Trutanich can study it.

Billboard critics claim the massive ads, and electronic billboards in particular, are an assault on the visual environment. But Leonard and Robinson agree that even today's billboards could have some artistic merit.

"I think they're just as important and just as valuable as they were in the past," Robinson said.

While the images in the exhibit do not have specific dates, clues can be taken from the pictures. The photographs show not only the billboards, but also the landscape around the ads.

"What's struck everybody who's come in here are the cars, the buildings that are around," said Leonard.

Many of the cars appear to be from the 1950s, with long Oldsmobiles, Fords and Chevys being the most prominent. There are plenty of other signs of change, such as a diner that can be glimpsed under one billboard. Called The Corner, it offers a New York steak and eggs for \$1.

"They're a history book of our city," Robinson said. "Those kinds of images are something an archeologist or anthropologist would look at 100 years from now."

The Billboard Show: Selling the So-Cal Lifestyle is at Take My Picture, 860 S. Broadway, (213) 622-2256 or takemypicture.com. Contact Richard Guzmán at richard@downtownnews.com.

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