

Final coat finishes billboard artwork

By Greg Hassell, Houston, Chronicle, March 16, 1999



FOR THE PAST nine months, two office workers named Pam and Karen watched the Absolut Art Guys billboard receive its 1,000 coats of paint with an ardor that is somewhere between fascination and obsession.

"My daughter calls me after school every day and asks, 'What color is it today?'" said Pam, who works in an office building directly across the West Loop from the billboard. "My husband bought me binoculars for Christmas so I could watch the painting. I brought them from home and keep them at my desk.

"I know it sounds kind of stupid when I say that, but there is something about this that is so different. It's become an event at our office," she said. "Everybody talks about it."

On Friday, the Art Guys finally applied the 1,000th and final coat of paint -- a shade of green called Sailing Ship. Pam and Karen snuck away from the office so they could witness the event.

"Technically speaking, we are in the ladies room or something like that," Karen said.

They were among about 50 spectators, not counting a TV news helicopter hovering overhead, who showed up for the big moment. Several thousand

motorists could see from the Loop, which was gripped in its customary 5 o'clock traffic jam.

As the artists climbed 40 feet to apply the final coat, Pam had just one question: "Who are the Art Guys?"

Who are these guys?

The Art Guys are two Houstonians who take an unusual view of art. They've built artful constructions out of old beer bottles and battered suitcases. For their show Bulk Up for CAM, the two went on a crash bodybuilding course and documented the results with a series of black-and-white photographs.

A current project is something called Suits: The Clothes Make The Man. It involves taking two suits designed by Todd Oldham and persuading corporations to buy advertising space on the jacket and pants. The Art Guys will wear them at special events for one year. (The duo appeared in the suits at Dallas' St. Patrick's Day parade this past weekend.)

Suits is intended to bring people into a humorous dialogue about art and marketing. The suits, like the Absolut billboard, actually go Andy Warhol one better. They aren't about marketing. They ARE marketing.

"I love their whole ironic-but-not-mean-spirited attitude," said Dan Braun, a creative director at the advertising agency TBWA Chiat/Day in New York. "They are able to mix fun and exuberance with art."

raun helped bring the Art Guys and Absolut together and create the billboard commission. Now that the final coat is on, he's the one who was exuberant.

"Everyone at the agency who worked on this is thrilled," he said Friday. "They all wanted to come down here from New York to see this."

Local sales for Absolut are up since the billboard campaign started in June. How much of that is attributable to the Art Guys is debatable, but it's fair to suggest 1,000 Coats of Paint has given Absolut more luster in Houston.

"In Houston, Absolut was just another name," said Wayne Feldman, regional marketing manager for Absolut. "I think this has brought us out into the limelight."

The first 999 are the hardest.

While the Art Guys applied the final coat and were the masterminds of the project, they hired someone else to paint the first 999 coats. That someone is Bernard Brunon, proprietor of That's Painting Productions. He and his employees were the guys who actually climbed up there in the blistering heat and freezing rain.

"This is hard work," said Brunon, wearing a white T-shirt and shorts dotted with what looked to be 999 samples of paint. "I've built some upper body muscles, and I lost about 10 pounds."

While it was undoubtedly difficult, Brunon says he loved the work. He had anticipated that it would become tedious, but somehow, it never did. One reason was the many encounters he had with people who appreciated what he was doing -- including one carload of folks who wanted an unusual type of autograph.

"Some people brought a big, square piece of cardboard out. They wanted me to dribble some paint down on it," said Brunon. "So I did. They waved up at me. They were very happy."

Other visitors stopped by with various treats.

"One lady stopped by and said, 'I brought you a bag of cookies. I've been watching you up there,'" Brunon recalled. "Another morning, one of my partners was up there and someone brought him breakfast from McDonald's."