



Hand Painted Billboard, James Crespinel, 1986; Oil paints on medium density overlay wood panels; 14' x 18'
Ackerley Communications of the Northwest, Inc. for Benetton Corp.

Hand Painted Billboard by James Crespinel

I am an artist who likes to make paintings where the images are as large as or larger than life. Trying to work on that scale presented me with some problem solving challenges, and eight years ago, like most artists, I went looking for solutions.

That's the reason I began working for a billboard company. I realized it was a unique chance to learn how to paint on a grand scale and develop techniques I could use in my personal artwork . . . I say personal, as opposed to the billboards, which I now consider to be my commercial art.

You learn a lot about visual information when you paint billboards. For one thing, your audience doesn't have the time or space in which to study your work. They usually see it while driving in a car, from across a busy highway, or see it mixed in with a cityscape of buildings, telephone poles and neon signs. If you want your audience to see your message, you have to catch their attention.

The Benetton billboard shows you some of the techniques for getting people's attention. One way, of course, is to make the image *huge*, but I also use very bright, eye-catching colors. Another helpful technique is contrast—that means placing the two girls on a white background so that they stand out, or appear to come forward from their billboard easel. And of great importance is my big selection of brushes for applying the oil paint. Those brushes give me lots of tools and choices for creating life-like textures to suggest hair, skin and clothing. If I use all of these techniques, I can create a photo-realistic image, or a painting that looks like a photograph.

Making billboards has taught me painting skills, and it's also pointed out something important about the artistic process. As crucial as the application of paint is to the finished product, it's not the most time consuming, at least not for me. I can paint a 48-foot long, 14-foot high billboard in one week—but when I return to my personal artwork it takes a lot longer. That's because the concept or idea for the billboard is already decided by the company creating the advertisement. In my own artwork, *I'm* responsible for creating the message I want to send to the audience. That question of what to say and how to say it to others is a creative responsibility that takes a great deal of time and effort.

Even after eight years and six and one-half miles of billboards, I'm still learning. Every assignment is a new challenge, and every completed artwork a personal satisfaction.

James Crespinel