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Unknown Artists Find a Public Stage

By [GLENN COLLINS](#)

Orange? Yes.

Gates? Certainly.

Public art? Absolutely.

"The Gates"? Nope.

Yesterday, on the plaza just where the Christmas tree customarily looms over the skating rink at Rockefeller Center, the works of 10 contemporary artists began taking shape in a temporary gallery formed from a sugar-cubelike array of giant, unheated, orange modular boxes and cargo containers.

At midday, many of the artists began mounting the exhibition; some will not cease their aesthetic toil until Sunday night. The free show - titled "Art Rock" - will be formally open to the public for seven days, starting on Monday at noon.

Previous public art on the plaza has celebrated high-profile names like Jeff Koons with "Puppy," in 2000, an outsize terrier fashioned from 70,000 flowering plants; Louise Bourgeois with "Maman," a 34-foot-tall bronze spider, and two of its gargantuan offspring, in 2001; and Jonathan Borofsky who created "Walking to the Sky," seven life-size human figures on a 100-foot-tall slanted pole last year.

But "Art Rock" is the first plaza show featuring indoor and outdoor solo projects by relatively unknown artists; many of the installations are being created on site.

"There is a wealth of unknown artists, and many don't get the chance to show their work publicly," said Rob Speyer, senior managing director of Tishman Speyer Properties, manager and co-owner of Rockefeller Center.

"We wanted to give them the same access to the public usually reserved for high-profile names in the art world."

The target audience is the 250,000 passers-by on an average Midtown day. "We hope to expose the artists to people who might never have been to a gallery show, and we hope that they might be changed by what they see," said Abby Messitte, co-owner of Clementine Gallery in Manhattan, which produced the show and chose the artists.

"To most people, contemporary art is what Jay Leno makes fun of on the 'Tonight Show,' " said Taylor McKimens, 29, one of the artists. Yesterday he was hefting the faux facade of a white-shingled house, and installing cartoony windows that highlighted his three-dimensional drawings.

"I hope all of this might be a revelation to people who will see these works in a place where they aren't expecting to see contemporary art," Mr. McKimens added.

The two entrance gates to the plaza on 49th Street and 50th Streets are termed gateway lobbies in exhibition-speak, and their color is "like a hyper Rustoleum orange," said Todd Oldham, a designer who has created fashion, a furniture line for La-Z-Boy and a hotel in Miami. Mr. Oldham, a Clementine Gallery client, designed lounge areas at the gates in the interior space of four 11,000-pound shipping containers.

The 8-foot-by-20-foot lounges "have saltine-box scale," Mr. Oldham said, and are being furnished with varicolored "weird hairy carpet material," along with vinyl ottomans, floral displays and funky end-tables made from coiled cardboard spools, he said, "to carry the sponsors' propaganda."

This was a reference to Lucky, Cargo and Domino, the Condé Nast shopping magazines, which are sponsoring the show along with Tishman Speyer Properties.

"The lounges are a place to hang if you have a few minutes in your day," Mr. Oldham said. Since the lounges are unheated, however, hanging may be ephemeral, "though we are hoping for nice, sunny, ambient-heat days," he said.

Can those who may be pining for "The Gates" now find solace in shipping-container orange?

"I guess our presentation is coming on the heels of a great public art experience, and people may make that connection," Ms. Messitte said.

"But the coincidence of the timing, and the orange, it never occurred to us," she said. "Anyway, nothing is saffron."

The modules were trucked in, swung into the plaza with a 120-foot crane, and connected to form two 40-foot-long hallways in which most of the art is being installed; two installations will be outdoors.

Tishman Speyer declined to reveal how much the sponsors are spending, but those with knowledge of the exhibition estimated its cost to be in excess of \$250,000.

Last fall, Ms. Messitte and Elizabeth Burke, the other co-owner of Clementine, learned they had been rejected by the 2005 Armory Show, the Manhattan art fair at Piers 90 and 92 that opens on Friday. So the two women approached Mr. Speyer and his father Jerry - who had previously bought work from their gallery - requesting the donation of exhibition space to mount a show of new contemporary works. Ms. Burke said they just wanted "a parking lot or a warehouse or something."

Mr. Speyer came back to them with an upgrade: Rockefeller Plaza. "It's the best thing that ever happened to us," Ms. Messitte said, referring to the Armory rejection.

And so, yesterday, there was Rob Fischer, a 36-year-old artist who works in Brooklyn, hoisting the components of a narrow, 16-foot-long mirrored house, a 1,000-pound steel structure that will reflect "not only visitors to the show," he said, "but also all the office towers around it."

Ivan Navarro, 32, another Brooklyn artist, was positioning three aluminum-framed glass doors he had fitted with red, blue and yellow neon sculptures. Backed by mirrors and viewed through one-way glass, the images seemed to tunnel to infinity. The work, called "Short Cut," was created specifically for the Midtown location and is, he explained, an homage to Mondrian.

Marc Swanson, a 35-year-old artist, was assembling an installation called "Killing Moon II: Self-Portrait as a Yeti," an eight-foot-wide glassed-in diorama of - well, a city basement. It is inhabited by a sculpture of the abominable Mr. Swanson covered in white Mongolian lamb's wool.

"People will be creeped out by how much it looks like a basement," he said. "I hope I have time to linger in the corner and hear people's reactions."

The artists also include Matt Johnson, who converted a commercial steel Dumpster into a folded Dumpster-size airplane. Other exhibitors are Matthias Muller, Richard Aldrich, Ivan Witenstein, Sarah Oppenheimer and Trevor Appleson.

"Since we want folks who may not ordinarily have art in their lives to see this work and in some way be inspired by it" there was one important shared goal with "The Gates," Rob Speyer said.

"Perhaps," he added, "they might even develop an interest in art."