

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## When Billboards are Ripped and Abstracted...

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*Albany at San Pablo & Solana (Photograph © 2011 by Richard Sargent)*

...Richard Sargent likes to take pictures of them. “Photographing torn posters is a cliché in which I continue to indulge,” he writes. In fact, his photos of “decaying urban billboards” — all of them shot in northern California’s [East Bay](#) cities of Oakland, Berkeley, Albany, and Richmond — transform that cliché into brilliant works of found art. Seattle-based Workwomans Press has just published a dozen of the photos in Richard Sargent’s *EAST BAY BILLBOARDS CALENDAR 2012*. I think they are holy-shit gorgeous.

One could insist that Sargent is late to the game. But it’s not as if he has chosen to stand outside art history. He himself notes in a statement on the back of the calendar, “Artistic interest in decay is not new.” He also points out that “the images, messages, and juxtapositions are always changing,” and they offer “new meanings” to the viewer. Sargent, who is 79 and lives in Berkeley, says he was a former Navy photographer with an MFA in painting from the University of Southern California when he arrived in New York, in the 1950s, “during the prevailing reign of Abstract Expressionism.” His Pop-saturated décollage billboards evoke that influence.



Richmond on Barrett Ave (Photograph © 2011 by Richard Sargent)

“Fifty years later,” Sargent writes, “I find dripped paint, troweled impasto, and partial words peeling across disparate images in today’s decaying urban billboards which I see as my ‘found paintings.’ They are huge, flapping in the wind, in frames.” He lays claim to them, deservedly, as “my billboards.”



Oakland at Broadway & E 41st (Photograph © 2011 by Richard Sargent)

Some of his billboard photos call to mind the mid-20th century décollages of [Mimmo Rotella](#) or [Wolf Vostell](#), others seem to echo the combine paintings of Robert Rauschenberg. But their scale and profusion speak for themselves, and it’s only their perception through Sargent’s camera that enables them to be seen as art. However accidental or late, he has given them aesthetic purpose.



Oakland on Foothill Blvd (Photograph © 2011 by Richard Sargent)

It's a matter of taste, of course, but I'm crazy about all of them.



Oakland at 23rd & E 12th (Photograph © 2011 by Richard Sargent)

For a change of pace, how about this one.



Oakland at Market & 63rd (Photograph © 2011 by Richard Sargent)

Incidental intelligence: In case anybody wants to know, all the billboard photos in the calendar were taken since 2000. Here are the dates for the ones reproduced in this blogpost: *Albany at San Pablo & Solana* (April 13, 2010); *Richmond on Barrett Ave* (2006); *Oakland at Broadway & E 41st* (March 7, 2010); *Oakland on Foothill Blvd* (2006); *Oakland at 23rd & E 12th* (Dec. 30, 2008); *Oakland at Market & 63rd* (Nov. 2, 2000).

Sargent has served as Curator at the Long Beach Museum of Art, the Berkeley Art Center, and Dominican University's San Marco Gallery. His work has been shown at the Triangle Gallery, in San Francisco; the Giorgi Gallery, in Berkeley; North First Artspace, in San Jose; and both the Joyce Gordon Gallery and the Warehouse Gallery, in Oakland.

I'm told that the *EAST BAY BILLBOARDS CALENDAR 2012* may be ordered for a flat \$10 each within the U.S., including tax and shipping, by sending a check made payable to Workwomans Press, 4048 NE 58th Street, Seattle, WA 98105. Calendars will be mailed out First Class. For orders outside the U.S. the price is \$15, including shipping. Alternatively, they can be purchased via Paypal, using the email [GailChiarello@comcast.net](mailto:GailChiarello@comcast.net) to place an order.

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