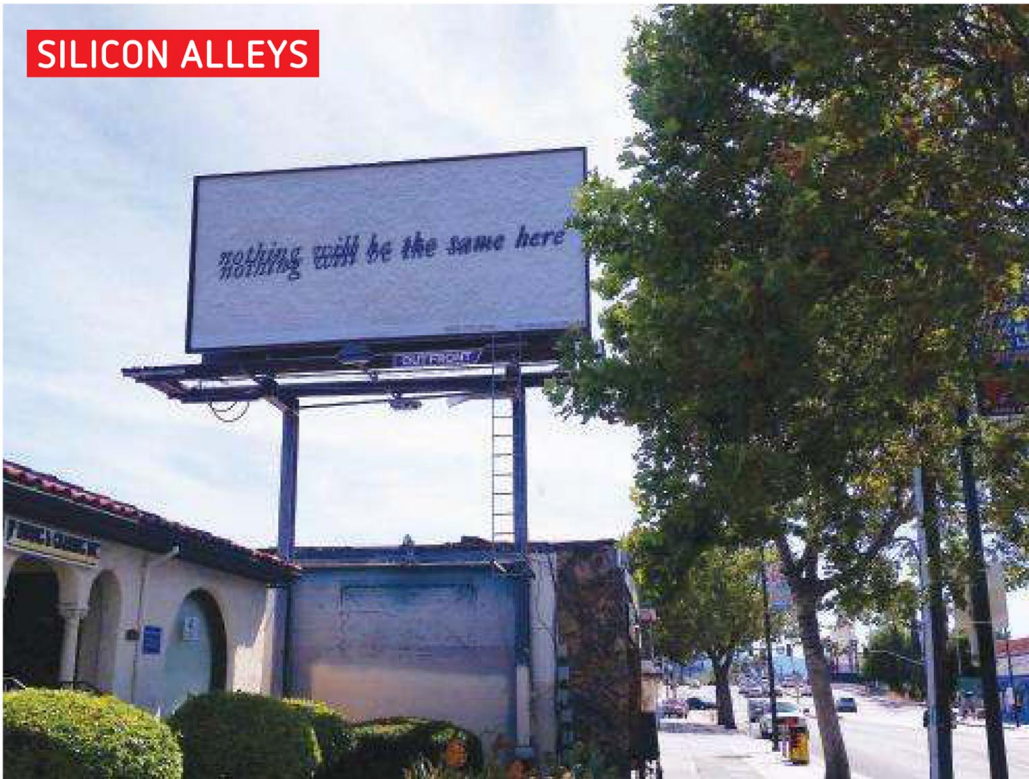


SILICON ALLEYS



Gary Singh

MESSAGE APP Montalvo exhibit brings art to public spaces.

ONLY THE LONELY

Billboards and bus stop messages explore togetherness amidst alienation

BY GARY SINGH

NEAR 34TH AND Santa Clara streets, one sentence on a billboard, profound in its simplicity, captures the San Jose condition on multiple levels. The billboard says, in all lowercase letters: “nothing will be the same here.” It begins in blurry fashion, before gradually coming into clarity at the final word. Entire San Jose history books do not say as much as that one sentence does.

“I specifically wanted it to be two

lines of text that are coming together into that word, ‘here,’ that it’s the coming together into the ‘here’ of the present moment,” said artist Alyson Provax, who created the billboard as part of Montalvo’s new array of public exhibitions, “lone some,” running through July 31.

In association with Montalvo’s 2019–20 season theme, SOCIAL: Rethinking Loneliness Together, artists have transformed various Bay Area billboards and bus stops into artworks that provoke questions about what it means to experience loneliness. Montalvo’s website features a map of all the projects.

Provax lives in Portland, but was born in Aptos and spent some of her youth in San Jose. Her dad grew up frolicking in the orchards near Moorpark Avenue and lived in a house where her grandparents still live.

“I just remember being completely unable to picture that these suburban spaces once were orchards,” Provax told me. “It was just a little bit beyond my imagination to think about how it had changed. But then, obviously now going back, it’s almost hard to not see what has changed. So, in a certain way, I think it’s like whatever your first memory of something is, settles into you. And then that becomes your starting place on those things.”

In pure Zen fashion, those six words—“nothing will be the same here”—carry a universe of local relevance. Since the billboard is practically hidden on the south side of Santa Clara Street, facing east toward the mountains, one has to drive or walk westward toward downtown in order to see it. Most won’t even notice it unless they’re looking for it, and once the “lone

some” exhibit concludes, the phrase will be gone.

On other levels, thanks to Covid-19, nothing will be the same here, and thanks to suburban sprawl and the continual exploits of real-estate syndicates, a perpetual, spinning yin-yang cycle of destruction and creation has characterized San Jose for 70 straight years now. Just about every local native, young or old, has some kind of story about a favorite San Jose place or event that was unnecessarily destroyed, canceled, ruined, subdivided, poisoned, colonized, watered down, painted over, commercialized, gutted or sold off. It’s a town partly defined by a sense of forced rootlessness.

Which is why we find ourselves needing to rethink loneliness, or at least refrain from attaching ourselves to impermanent phenomena. Artists can help us do that because, more often than not, they’re the only ones around here that really care.

The theme of Montalvo’s 2019/2020 season, SOCIAL: Rethinking Loneliness Together, emerged a couple years ago, after studies in the UK and Japan suggested loneliness was becoming a worldwide health problem. At first, not all of Montalvo’s high rollers were on board with the topic, but the organizers persisted and curated a fantastic series of installations, exhibits and events. Then along came Covid-19, and mass sheltering in place, to help unintentionally highlight the whole concept. Life and art just cannot, and will not, be separated.

“I would say that the pandemic is probably opening empathetic hearts around the issue of loneliness,” said Angela McConnell, Montalvo’s executive director, hoping that a three-month spate of sheltering in place will at least help some people understand the feelings of others a bit more. “That’s what the arts hopefully can do in terms of giving somebody an opportunity to see something in a different perspective, to feel something in a different way,” she said. “And so that’s the hope of ‘lone some.’”

Elsewhere in the South Bay, a ‘lone some’ installation by Modesto Covarrubias can be experienced at the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles, while some of Provax’ mirror-based work can be seen on the Montalvo grounds in Saratoga. [M](#)