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SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI, HOST:

Artists reflecting on the current political climate are taking their ideas to the streets. For one national project, some artists are making billboards about different social issues. NPR's Mandalit del Barco talked with some of them and also followed a well-known guerrilla street artist as he postered the streets of LA.

MANDALIT DEL BARCO, BYLINE: After dark on Wednesday, I met up with Robbie Conal and two of his artist friends as they made a bit of political mischief on the west side streets of LA.

ROBBIE CONAL: There's a box right there. Let's do that.

DEL BARCO: In the parking lot of Wendy's donuts in Marina del Rey, they spot their first target - a traffic light switching box perfectly sized for one of his new posters.

CONAL: Goldie (ph), you looking?

DEL BARCO: Lindsay Socar (ph) and and Brian Loson (ph) take turns on the lookout for police and painting wallpaper adhesive onto the metal box. Then Conal glues on one of his new black-and-white caricatures.

CONAL: Rudy Ghouliani.

DEL BARCO: The portrait of Rudy Giuliani is stamped with the phrase, was it something I said? They move quickly from location to location, laughing and kibitzing about food while postering Conal's portraits of President Trump and his inner circle, what he calls the "Cabinet Of Horrors." They're display at the downtown gallery Track 16. There, he had more time to explain his grotesque caricatures.

CONAL: I paint them exactly the way these people look on the inside. This year, because of Trump and his Cabinet of horrors, I've done almost 40 paintings of them, which is more than I've ever done in any year in the last 20 years.

DEL BARCO: At 74, Conal considered the godfather of political poster art in this country. He began in the 1980s with a portrait of Ronald Reagan and the words contra diction. Since then, he's poked fun at political figures from both parties. Back on the streets, Conal and his friends joke about the reactions his images have inspired.

CONAL: Some people write things on them. Like, why is art so demoralizing?

BRIAN LOSON: Why is art ugly, to demoralize us?

LINDSAY SOCAR: People contribute and prove, or sometimes they want it, so they might try to take it. Or people get angry at it if they don't like it. I've seen a lot of the faces ripped off.

DEL BARCO: Conal and crews have been arrested for vandalism, but sometimes he says even the cops who stop them ask for posters. Around the country, other artists are expressing themselves through a public art project called the 50 State Initiative. It features more than 100 billboards that touch on a variety of social issues and topics from immigration, to guns, to climate change, to national health care. Artist Hank Willis Thomas cofounded For Freedoms, a nonpartisan initiative behind the billboards project.

HANK WILLIS THOMAS: We believe that it's important at times like these to be visionary, not reactionary, and try to open doors for new ways of conversation.

DEL BARCO: He says the artists were given free rein how to express themselves. His two billboards that are up in Syracuse say, they are us and us is them. A billboard in Anchorage is a photo of Earth shot from space with the words, we are the asteroid. Another billboard in Clarksville, Tenn., depicts a creature that is half-elephant, half-donkey and the invitation, let's discuss. Artist Carrie Mae Weems created her billboard with a photo from a women's march with the words, vote and continue to dream. She's not telling viewers how to vote or how to dream, even if it might inspire someone to vote differently than she would.

CARRIE MAE WEEMS: That's the chance that you take, but every single gesture is a gesture towards hopefully having fuller dialogue and hopefully moving towards that greater democracy that we hope to realize in our lifetime. So you just keep participating. You keep going. And as a Curtis Mayfield would say, keep on pushing, keep on pushing.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "KEEP ON PUSHING")

CURTIS MAYFIELD: (Singing) Keep on pushing.

DEL BARCO: Mandalit del Barco, NPR News.

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