

Who Do You See?

Ed Massey's "In the Image" has Santa Monica talking

By Christina Campodonico



“It’s hard to ignore a seven-foot-tall man walking down the street,” artist Ed Massey tells me as we look up at his sculpture on the southeast corner of 26th Street and Wilshire Boulevard.

It’s an eye-catching work, not only for its height but also its subject matter. The imposing figure with shaggy shoulder-length dark hair and an unkempt beard has the face of a Westernized depiction of Jesus Christ, but from the neck down he’s the picture of a worn and weary homeless man, trudging through life with little more than the blanket tossed over his shoulder and

maybe a few coins in the bright red cup he carries with him.

“It looks real. ... I thought it was a real person standing there,” a curious 90-year-old pedestrian named Joseph, who’s lived in Santa Monica for 45 years, pauses to tell me on his afternoon walk. “But what does it mean?”

Like many pieces of art, the sculpture, which popped up in mid-November and will remain on display through the start of the New Year, is open to interpretation. Some have drawn comparisons to artist Timothy P. Schmalz’s “Homeless Jesus,” casts of which have appeared in front of churches around the globe and depict Christ sleeping under a blanket on a park bench with his crucifixion-pierced bare feet exposed.

Massey doesn’t see his work as a religious art piece, but says that the work’s title, “In the Image,” is derived from a biblical theme and passage.

“I’ve had priests that have looked and seen the piece and commented that it could be resembling — because of the symbolism — St. Jude,” says Massey. “Others have told me in Spanish and in English that it looks like Jesús Cristo, you know, Jesus Christ. That’s an interpretation I leave up to the general public.”

The sculpture is actually based on the likeness of an incredibly tall homeless man that Massey encountered one late night in Westwood 21 years ago. Massey was on his way to a 24-hour copy center with some blueprints when the appearance of a seven-foot tall man startled him.

“He had the stature of this like almost Hercules Olympian athlete,” says Massey. “He had a super double Big Gulp. ... He was just disheveled looking. And as I continued walking, I could hear his breath, and I just continued right past him to go to the door. ... I just held my breath. ... It was a sight that I had not seen before in my life.”

Massey's initial fear response gave way to deeper reflection later on.

"I misjudged him because he was literally a gentle giant. ... He had this almost, not only gentle look, but almost a saint-like appearance to him," says Massey, who continued to wonder: "What in the world did it take for a man of this stature, this physical presence, to be out on the streets instead of out on the courts or out on the field playing his sport?"

In some ways "In the Image" is not "typical" of his work, observes Massey, who is probably best known around Los Angeles for colorful displays of public art that he's put together with his brother Bernie through their Santa Monica-based nonprofit Portraits of Hope. (A few notable projects include filling the lake at MacArthur Park with a fleet of floral inflatable spheres, adding a splash of color to Los Angeles' lifeguard towers, and more recently swathing the L.A. Convention Center's circular facade with bright geometric shapes.) In other ways, "In the Image" is completely an extension of the artist's social justice-minded body of work.

For the 1997 project "Made in the U.S.A.," Massey had text printed inside and on the flaps of cardboard boxes (materials a homeless person might appropriate to beg for food or use for shelter) with the words an indigent person might use to plead his or her case in all caps and almost no punctuation: "HOMELESS VET WILL WORK FOR FOOD OR SHELTER."; "HOMELESS AND HIV POSITIVE"; "HOMELESS MOTHER — PLEASE HELP — "; "OUT OF LUCK BUT NOT OUT OF HOPE GOD BLESS YOU FOR YOUR HELP."

A 1992 sculpture called "Checkmate" includes two homeless figurines on a 48"-by-48" gilded chess table. One carrying a sign that reads "Will Work for Food" stands next to a chess piece meant to represent the U.S. president. The other lies collapsed under Lady Liberty.

Massey made "In the Image" decades ago, but this is the first time the seven-

foot statue of a homeless man has been shown publicly. For the last 20 years the sculpture has resided outside the South Bay-based artist's studio, fittingly weathering the rain, cold and elements just like his real life counterpart.

“He’s never been inside, which is appropriate for the project as well,” says Massey, speaking of the sculpture. “After I completed him, I left him outside ... for another day and another day. ... The years built up.”

As Greater Los Angeles’ homeless population began to soar and became more visible on the streets and present in public consciousness (L.A. County’s homeless population rose to nearly 59,000, according to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority’s most recent homeless count), Massey felt a newfound urgency to put “In the Image” out there.

“Every major city in the country’s having this horrible, horrible issue,” says Massey, also noting how the presence of homelessness has become especially acute in Santa Monica, where he grew up. “San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, Washington D.C., New York, Boston. I can go on and on. ... But of course, Los Angeles itself is exasperated.

“In Santa Monica you had pockets of homelessness, but it wasn’t nearly as constant as we see today. It is now. Not only is it omnipresent, it’s something that I think every single person is at least familiar with — that on any given block, whether they’re pedestrians or in vehicles, they’re going to see someone on the street that has no home.

“I don’t see this any less than a national disaster,” he adds. “It’s a tragedy. It’s a calamity.”

Massey found a temporary home for “In the Image” in front of the former Home Savings building, which is scheduled for demolition after losing its landmark status last year. Millard Sheets’ glass mosaic mural “Pleasures Along the Beach” was removed from the building’s façade to be relocated to

Chapman University's Hilbert Museum of California Art earlier this year, and Richard Ellis' bronze statue of a family at play ("Family Group at the Beach") has also been removed.

Santa Monica residents are upset with these losses and long-appreciated public art is a tough act to follow, but Massey chose the location for its potential reach and impact.

"This is a kind of central area of Santa Monica," he says, "and we have a big bus stop right here. ... We have a tremendous amount of bus riders who come on and off at that stop from all different areas of Los Angeles. ... I want the person who's here taking the Metro at two in the morning, who can't afford to go to a museum, to see it."

A homeless man who sleeps near the statue, Massey tells me, has adopted the sculpture as a personal cleanup and security project, picking up any trash around the piece and watching over it at night.

"He takes a flashlight at night and when he gets there to his place, he'll do just a once over," says Massey, noting that a ring of security cameras encircles the statue. "He says it gave him something to do, which he's really thankful for. So I'm very thankful for him."

While "In the Image" has resonated with some, it has hit a raw nerve with others. A post about the statue by the watchdog Instagram account @SantaMonicaProblems elicited a flood of comments, ranging from supportive to sardonic to vitriolic.

"I think [it's] representative of the homeless problem and to remember [they're] human... or brings awareness to the problem of homeless in Santa Monica-Venice-WestLA-SkidRow," wrote one user with a sad face emoji.

"The owner could have just put a bench there and had the real thing daily,"

commented another, adding a laughing with tears emoji sign.

“A bum with a Big Gulp? Does he have a bunch [of] needles and meth pipe too?” chimed in another.

“Seems like a missed opportunity,” wrote another user. “Could have had a homeless drug addict just stand there all day sh**ting, smoking drugs, getting naked, twitching and yelling at people.”

For Massey however, “In the Image” is about more than likes or dislikes on social media. He hopes the public conversation around homelessness can move past inflammatory comments to more constructive discussion of solutions.

“This is just a reminder that there are men and women out there, and that a lot of us will not want to confront or look eye-to-eye with a homeless person,” says Massey. “If someone is offended really by a cement-and-steel sculpture, be more offended at the blood and flesh and flesh and blood out on the streets who are walking and shivering in the cold here. That’s what we should be upset with — not this.”

ChristinaC@argonautnews.com