

Agitating for change through art - Santa Monica Daily Press

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The Massey brothers know you might not like the statue of a homeless man recently installed at 26th and Wilshire, but they also know homelessness has become a national disaster and if the moral compunction to do something hasn't worked so far, they're happy to agitate residents into action.

Maybe it was their upbringing, with a social worker mother raising them on the great Mexican muralists. Maybe it's their restless curiosity. Maybe it's just because they have to do something when confronted with the injustice of the world and art activism is what they do best.

Whatever the root motivation, the siblings have earned a reputation for sharp commentary on the issues of the day and their most recent installation is camping at a building that has its own controversial history with public art.

“There are some issues that at any given time can have a pronounced impact on peoples’ lives and we always ask ourselves if we can have an impact on those issues,” said Bernie Massey.

The pair have never been bystanders to issues of social justice with Ed Massey creating the art and Bernie creating educational opportunities around the work while helping with the practical needs of installing large-scale public projects. School trips are planned to visit the new Santa Monica work as part of a curriculum on homelessness.

The piece at the former Savings and Loan building, called “In the Image,” confronts viewers with the modern homeless crisis, but it was born in a time when the issue was far less prominent.

20 years ago, artist Ed was on his way to the local FedEx with some recently completed blueprints. Perhaps it was the late hour, 2 a.m., or his focus on the work, but for whatever reason, Ed didn’t see the homeless man approaching until they were practically eye to eye.

Ed was startled by the imposing size of the man.

“I thought I’m either going to get hurt or die,” he said.

However, the two men passed without a word and Ed said that despite his towering height, the man had a genteel demeanor and a calm face.

“I misjudged him and that played a critical role in development of the piece,” he said.

The work has sat in his yard for most of its life but he said homelessness has become a national disaster and Los Angeles is at the epicenter of the problem. Ed said he is a student of his environment and with the work already created, he felt it needed to be put back into the public realm.

“Homelessness is a massive visual component of our lifestyle,” he said.

When he saw the vacant pedestal at 26th and Wilshire, he called the property owner. After a phone conversation and a visit to see the sculpture, the owner agreed to lend Ed the corner for the next six weeks.

Ed works with his brother Bernie and the two plan education and action around the themes of Ed’s art.

In this case, Bernie said there wasn’t the same motivation to tackle homelessness 20 years ago when the work was first created but that he hoped having it back in public view would serve as a catalyst for public action.

“As dark as the issue may seem to people, when people get riled up enough, you get movement ... Perhaps we’re getting to that tipping point,” he said.

Bernie said public art is important for an issue like homelessness because it’s the will of the people that will determine how the disaster unfolds. He said if people are ultimately satisfied living next to homeless encampments, they won’t agitate for more housing, rehab centers, job programs or other services necessary to stem the rising tide of hopelessness.

“People may be OK with that, and elected officials do what the public demands,” he said. “The public will determine the course of this issue.”

The brothers said that the average citizen can be reluctant to even acknowledge homelessness on the streets and people often avert their eyes from an actual homeless person. However, an installation like “In the Image” can be arresting enough to penetrate someone’s visual awareness but it also provides an opportunity to stop and engage in thought.

“We might have to bring out a piece that is inanimate to wake people up and have them contemplate the plight of the homeless,” said Ed. “The visual impact of an inanimate object like a sculpture can have a tremendous impact.”

students of all ages.

The symbol of the Portraits of Hope program is a flower in an array of vibrant colors that the artist describes as the universal icon of joy, life, youth, beauty, hope, inspiration, and renewal.

The flowers have covered New York City taxis, lifeguard towers along the Southern California Beach, rescue vehicles in Aspen and Santa Monica's beloved winter ice rink.

“From its inception, Portraits of Hope has emphasized hands-on civic engagement opportunities for the broader public,” says the organization’s mission statement. “Portraits of Hope’s integrated elements are Public Art, Civic Education, Health, Teamwork, Community Engagement, Achievement, and Visibility.”

The emotions invoked by “In the Image” may differ from those brought on by the Portraits project but both have the same goal: to prompt action on a vital topic through the visual arts.

“Contributing like this really defines who we are,” said Bernie. “We use the visual to galvanize and then go from there.”

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