

Santa Monica LOOKOUT

Traditional Reporting for A Digital Age

Homeless Sculpture Installed in Former Home of Iconic Mural

By Jorge Casuso

November 20, 2019 -- A seven-foot-tall sculpture of a homeless man was unveiled Monday in the courtyard of the former Santa Monica bank building once graced by the iconic mural "Pleasures Along the Beach."

Titled "In The Image," the work by Los Angeles artist and activist Ed Massey was installed two and a half months after the mural by renown artist Millard Sheets was relocated to the City of Orange ("*How Santa Monica Lost Its Iconic Half-Century Old Mosaic,*" June 7, 2019).



"In The Image" by Ed Massey (Courtesy of Olmstead Williams Communications, Inc)

The new sculpture -- which will be on display for six weeks -- depicts a bearded homeless man in baggy clothes staring at a red plastic cup in his hand, a blanket draped across a shoulder.

The sculpture installed at the 50-year-old Home Savings building on 26th Street and Wilshire Boulevard "simultaneously references contemporary social themes and historical religious imagery," according to Massey.

The work, the artist wrote in an accompanying description, invites passersby to "contemplate their views and elevate their discourse on the issue -- one that has now come to affect us all where we work and live."

"In The Image" is the first of a number of planned short-term sculpture installations at the site, said Xiliary Twil of Art Asset Management Group, Inc., which is overseeing the relocation of the Sheets mural to the City of Orange.

Wilshire-26, LLC, which owns the property currently rented to the specialty shoe chain Surefoot, issued a statement about Massey's mural.

"Whatever side of the political isle you are on, the homeless crisis is an issue that needs to be dealt with on a humanitarian level now," the company said.

The site provides "a highly visible venue" to display Massey's "compelling work in a touching manner, and to evoke discussion to this increasing problem that effects everyone in Los Angeles and can no longer be ignored."

According to Massey's website, the painter and sculptor "creates and/or conceives the ideas and concepts for major, large-scale, public artworks, many of which have visually transformed iconic symbols, settings, and cityscapes."

The artist caused a stir in Santa Monica 25 years ago when he installed a sculpture in an office building window depicting two figures of men hanging from their genitals above a raped woman.

The anti-rape art display stopped traffic, stunned pedestrians, spurred heated debate and led to a demonstration by some 60 people, the Outlook reported at the time.

Massey's sculpture is the latest in a number of public artworks depicting the homeless, sometimes drawing parallels with Christ.

Since 2013, Canadian sculptor Timothy Schmalz has installed his "Homeless Jesus" sculptures depicting a homeless figure sleeping on a park bench.

The sculptures made headlines and stirred debate in numerous cities, including Reno, Seattle, Toronto and Montreal.

Santa Monica's innovative approaches to tackling homelessness have put the beach city -- once dubbed the "home of the homeless" -- at the forefront of a nationwide battle to tackle the problem.

But despite a transient population that has remained relatively steady -- rising from 957 in 2018 to 985 this year -- homelessness remains a hot-button issue in the city of 94,000 ("*Santa Monica Homeless Count Shows Slight Increase*," March 21, 2019).

Activists last year called for a crackdown on the homeless they say have taken over several city parks ("*City Council Orders Study Session on Park Safety*," November 15, 2018).

The homeless -- who account for a disproportionate number of public safety calls -- have also been the suspects and victims of a series of high-profile homicides over the past two years.

Twenty-two homeless people living in Santa Monica died in 2018, surpassing the homeless death rate for Los Angeles County ("*Nearly Two Dozen Homeless People Died in Santa Monica Last Year; Rate was Higher than County's*," May 6, 2019).