



# Art installation confronts homeless crisis - Santa Monica Daily Press

Nov. 20, 2019 at 6:00 am

A new sculpture has been installed at the former Savings and Loan building (26th and Wilshire).

The statue, titled “In The Image” is by Ed Massey and the accompanying description says the Image is a portrait of a homeless man Massey encountered 20 years ago.

“Good people — progressive to conservative, secular to religious — are confronted by the issue everyday,” says part of the description. “Yet, few know the stories of the homeless with whom we come in contact. What don’t we know of those we pass without a glance? What could be their potential contributions? What does the sculpture evoke or say about us?”

The Millard Sheets mural that used to sit on the front of the building was removed this year after the building lost its status as a landmark. While City Hall did designate the property and art as a landmark in 2017 the property owners filed a lawsuit. City Council settled the case in 2018 with an agreement that revoked the landmarking of the property and allowed the owner to move the mural off-site.

According to the description, the new work was originally planned as a piece of public art.

“The In the Image work was always intended for the public realm, so viewers and passersby could contemplate their views and elevate their discourse on the issue — one that has now come to affect us all where we work and live,” it said.

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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