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Homeless Man Statue Aims to Inspire a Movement

Joshua Gonzalez and Jackie Sedley · December 5, 2019

As a part of a six-week short-term exhibition, a seven foot tall sculpture of a homeless man stands on the corner of 26th and Wilshire in Santa Monica, Calif. Entitled "In the Image," the sculpture was created by artist Ed Massey over 20 years ago but has not been put out for the general public until this year.

Massey's initial inspiration to create the concrete and steel-based sculpture came after an encounter with a homeless man roughly 21 years ago in Westwood, Calif. He was walking down the street late at night and wrongfully



Locals gather at the corner for the new art display replacing "Pleasures along the Beach"

Drawing people from all over Los Angeles, "In The Image," work by Los Angeles activist and artist Ed Massey, stands on the corner of 26th and Wilshire Boulevard in Santa Monica, Calif. "In the Image" is a 7-foot tall statue of a homeless man staring into a red plastic drink cup and red blanket. The piece by Massey invites its visitors to "contemplate their views and

assumed that the 7 foot tall homeless man walking towards him was going to do harm. After the man proved Massey's gut feeling wrong and continued down the road, the artist turned to creative expression as a way to document his experience.

"I typically wouldn't do a piece and spend that much time on someone that I didn't really have a conversation with or really get to know," said Massey. "But I spent time pondering and thinking, 'here's a man that looked like an olympic athlete or an NBA professional or maybe a football player, what in the world got to a point where he had to be out on the streets?'"

According to Massey, he was inspired to put the piece into the public eye because he feels as though people need to start turning their agitation towards the "unfortunate explosion of men and women out on our streets" into action and compassion. Having grown up in Santa Monica, Massey is no stranger to the common sight of the homeless in Los Angeles. However, he wants people to stop numbing themselves to the issue and start confronting the problem.

"I think that for most people, we've become numb by the homeless men and women on the streets, and very few

elevate their discourse on the issue -- one that has now come to affect us all where we work and live." "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," quote by Wilshire-26, LLC property owning company. The statue replaces mural "Pleasures Along The Beach" by Millard Sheets, which lived above the entrance of the 50-year-old Home Savings building. Now, after nearly a year of uncertainty as to where the mural would live, it has a new home in the permanent collection of the Hilbert Museum of California Art at Chapman University. Tuesday, December 3rd, 2019. (Randy Martinez / The Corsair)

people will actually look up to see a homeless person,” said Massey. “They’ll try to either avoid or not make eye contact. Here, anyone can feel that comfort zone of looking at this piece, and hopefully people will congregate and start discussing this issue.”

As an experienced artist, Massey feels as though his strengths lie in artistic expression and the visual impact that his creations can elicit. Rather than trying to bolster his reputation, Massey urges viewers to take the piece seriously.

“This is not meant just art for arts sake, this is meant to really stir the dialogue and get the emotions up there for people,” said Massey. “If you’re offended by the sculpture, please be offended by the men and women on the streets more so. This is an inanimate object, this will go away in six weeks, our homeless men and women will not.”

While some may remain cynical of activism through art in general, Santa Monica College Democratic Socialists Club (DSC) President and Activist Tom Rahlter believes that works such as Massey’s are ultimately beneficial to movements addressing the homeless crisis.

“The way that we actually get to fixing the problem is through social activism,” said Rahlter. “It’s through pushing policy change, and I think that there’s great inherent value in art if it raises people’s awareness, and it gets people, even in a small way, towards pushing for social change.”

He also emphasized that the rising prominence of multiple homelessness activist groups in Los Angeles only strengthens the effectiveness of socially conscious art.

"The difference between art being an effective tool and art being an ineffective tool is whether or not that art is taking place in a vacuum, and whether or not there's a movement behind it," he said. "If there is no movement and it's just happening on its own, then you're kind of spitting into a hurricane. I think what we're seeing is [that] there really is a movement . . . so I think the statue really only contributes to that nascent, but growing movement."