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celebrations

A Wedding Dress That Breaks the Mold

By GREY LE CUYER
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Apparently, Ed Massey is not a superstitious fellow. The old saw about it being bad luck for the groom to see his bride in her gown before the wedding goes right out the window when the groom is the one who sculpted the gown.

That's right—sculpted.

Massey, 35, a Los Angeles-based artist whose reputation for creating public art pieces is on the rise, decided he wanted to do something wildly romantic to show Dawn Harris how much he loved her.

When he mentioned that he had an idea about designing her wedding dress, Harris, 35, responded, "Yeah, right. I told him it's always been a tradition in my family that my grandmother buys the wedding dress, but he convinced me he was serious and finally persuaded me to let him do it."

One steel mesh form, a few elaborately engineered

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KIRK McKey / Los Angeles Times

Ed Massey finished the dress he sculpted for bride Dawn Harris a few days before their wedding.

DRESS

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wheels, 1,060 roses individually hand-crafted from cloth and modeling paste, two ducks and 14 ducklings later, the approximately 150-pound gown was ready for its debut.

On June 27, as 300 guests sat on folding chairs arranged around the pool in the backyard of a Beverly Hills home, the trellises fronting the pool house separated like stage curtains to reveal Harris navigating the narrow pathway around the pool toward the *chuppa* on a wheeled platform. Her wheels got stuck once or twice along the journey and, happily, she did not topple into the pool. The gown does not include a quick release hatch.

Harris and Massey met as toddlers while visiting their grandmothers, who were neighbors in Pacific Palisades. Relating the story in Massey's work space at the Century City Westside Pavilion after the couple's wedding rehearsal dinner, Harris recalled, "My grandma says that when we were babies, we played together. I think I saw him once, when I was 11."

"I think you beat me up," Massey said.

"I was much bigger than he was," Harris said.

After that, they did not see each other for 20 years. Massey graduated from UCLA in 1986 and moved to New York to attend graduate school at Columbia University, earning a master's degree in fine arts in 1990. Harris graduated from Cypress College in 1986 and worked as a dental hygienist before moving on to pursue her

dream of writing songs. When they finally ran into each other again at a dinner party at Massey's grandmother's house, the proverbial sparks flew.

"For me, it's been like the most incredible dream come true," Massey said. "In a city like Los Angeles, it's difficult to find a really sincere, very genuine, very wonderful, warmhearted person. And to find one who's so unaffected and beautiful on top of that? Finding Dawn was like a home run package. I've never remotely been in a relationship like this. I truly yearn to see Dawn every day."

"He leaves me messages on my answering machine all the time," Harris said. "He sings to me all the time. But at first, it was hard for us to cross that boundary past friendship. He made me so nervous, because I had this crush on him instantly from the first time I saw him again."

After a series of hints (Massey made Harris a picture frame bordered in hand-sculpted roses and she was the only person he invited to his first gallery opening), Massey devised a Machiavellian scheme for his marriage proposal. He created a children's party centered around the supposed niece of one of his workers. After a morning run on a Santa Monica beach, Massey convinced Harris that he had to make an appearance at this child's party.

There were more than a dozen children playing in a park, allegedly celebrating a birthday. When the children broke the piñata Massey had made, a little girl presented Harris with a tiny box that fell out. Inside were candy, fake

money, toys and a felt strawberry. In the strawberry was Harris' engagement ring. When Massey fell to his knee to propose, Harris thought it was a joke. Only when she felt how hard his heart was beating, she said, did she realize he was sincere.

Massey worked on the dress for four months, often until 3 or 4 in the morning as the final weeks leading up to their wedding closed in, finishing with less than three days left.

To start the dress, he recruited a welder he knew to forge an armature out of steel to support the weight of gallons upon gallons of paint and modeling paste, in addition to the cloth used to fashion the 1,060 roses. Each rose was hand-wired to the frame, which was then attached to the flexible cloth bodice, also covered with sculpted roses, each hand-sewn into place.

To manipulate the oppressive weight of the creation, he attached the steel frame to wheels, with some engineering assistance from Massey's stepfather, Sam Levy.

The train, which is about 5 feet long, pivots on another wheel. It is bordered in roses and features a family of sculpted ducks and 14 ducklings swimming in a small blue pond to symbolize family and fertility.

Harris described the dress as "indescribable." His inspiration, said Massey, was Harris. "Dawn is a fairy tale. It may sound corny to other people, but my love for Dawn is like a fairy tale."

The wedding took place one day shy of the first anniversary of Massey's proposal, after months of planning and secrecy, as the last of

the lavender jacaranda blooms carpeted Sierra Drive.

A sextet of teenage girls hired to act as paparazzi snapped guests as they arrived. Floating candles illuminated the ceremony, which took place according to Jewish law after the Sabbath sundown. The ceremony was followed by an all-desert buffet featuring many things chocolate as well as hand-tied dessert tamales, reflecting Massey's Mexican heritage.

Champagne and dancing lasted until the neighbors complained about the noise. And no, Harris did not dance in the sculpted dress; she had another gown to change into for the reception—one she kept secret from her groom, preserving superstition and tradition.