

Art into Action

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Ed Massey challenges local leaders: Make progress on homelessness or become famous for the world’s “prettiest homeless tents”

By Christina Campodonico



Artist-activist Ed Massey’s brilliant polychrome tents are designed to call attention to the homeless crisis and provoke action

Ed Massey has a plan to make L.A.’s homeless crisis a little easier on the eyes and that much harder for local leaders to justify. He hopes he won’t have to follow through on it.

Last fall the artist-activist riled up Santa Monicans and social media users when he erected a seven-foot statue of a shaggy homeless man on the southeast corner of Wilshire Boulevard and 26th Street.

On Friday he announced a plan to deploy 5,000 brightly colored polychrome tents across Los Angeles County in the next year, adding pops of color to city streets while providing shelter to the region's burgeoning homeless population.

Objects of art as well as utility, the 85-inch wide by 55-inch tall tents designed to sleep two are covered with cheery designs from Massey's large-scale Portraits of Hope public art projects (flamboyant fish and flowers you may have seen floating on giant beach balls on MacArthur Park Lake nearly five years ago) and some of his signature artworks (round organic patterns from his mural on the side of Samy's Camera on Fairfax Avenue).

Massey unveiled three tent prototypes at the foot of his controversial statue, officially titled "In the Image," which has a passing resemblance to Western depictions of Jesus Christ.

"Imagine the streets lined up and encampments lined up with fuchsias and purples and lavenders and greens. It'll look beautiful," Massey told The Argonaut. "But it's not necessary. We don't need more tents. ... We need people off the streets. We need people in real housing."

So why plan to add more tents, which have become synonymous with the homeless crisis, to the urban landscape? Massey says they're a "challenge" to Greater L.A.'s political leadership and everyday Angelenos to confront the problem and become "agitated" into action.

"I want the public to see, 'Look, is this what we've come to?'" said Massey. "We will have people from all over the world traveling to Los Angeles and seeing this and saying, 'Wow, look at those pretty tents. L.A. has the prettiest homeless tents.' ... That's not what we want to be known for. We don't want that distinction."

For Massey, the medium is the message.



At the foot of his “In the Image” statue in Santa Monica, Massey unveiled prototypes for 5,000 colorful pop-up tents that would double as shelter for the homeless

“Tents are meant to be out in bucolic settings or on fly-fishing trips or on camping trails,” he said. “The urban landscape is not meant to have plastic tents on them with no carpeting ... no bathroom, no showers nearby.”

Similarly, Massey decided to put fish on some of his tents to underline the unnatural state of homelessness — how people facing homelessness are “really out of their element,” “like fish out of water.”

Massey doesn't want to have to follow through with this eye-grabbing way of bringing attention to L.A. County's nearly 60,000 documented homeless, but will “if the situation doesn't get better” within the next year to 15 months, he says. He's confident he'll be able to get funding for the tents, and estimates that with the help of volunteers he can deploy 5,000 of them in about a week's time if the project is mobilized.

“It's the first project I've ever, ever been involved in in my life that I'm rooting against,” said Massey. “I don't want to do this project.”

Some are more receptive of the project than others.

“In terms of Ed Massey's pledge, our hope would be that a gesture like that might help galvanize the community around the kind of long-term, permanent solutions that are critically important to addressing the region's housing crisis,” said Paul Rubenstein, Vice President of Development and Communications for the Venice-based social services nonprofit St. Joseph Center.

“Publicity stunts don't solve problems,” countered Santa Monica Arts Commissioner Phil Brock, who owns property near the homeless encampments along Third and Rose avenues in Venice.

“Making a colorful spectacle on Venice or Santa Monica streets, or any Westside streets, is not helping solve the problem,” Brock said, but allowed that “I would love for him to put out 5,000 of these tents on the Veterans Administration property in Westwood and let them manage the site. ... I understand him wanting to make a point, and I think it's a valid point.”

Reuben “Richie” Monreal, who regularly sleeps near Massey’s “In the Image” statue and keeps watch over it at night, sees the tents as a “positive thing” that “lights up the corner.” The 54-year old thinks they’d be a wake-up call for housed Angelenos to pay attention to their homeless neighbors on “their doorstep.”

“It’s like ‘Bam!’” he says.

Staff writer Gary Walker contributed to this story.