

Art For More Than Art's Sake

■ **Santa Monica resident Ed Massey addresses social ills with public art.**

By Meghan Ward

Painter, sculptor, writer, philanthropist and provocateur, Ed Massey is at the forefront of a generation of artists seeking to move, shock and provoke discussion among the general populace through the creation of large-scale public works of art.

"From the Mexican muralists onward, to have a large and general audience, who do not necessarily frequent galleries and museums, can have a tremendous impact," Massey said.

"Corporate Ladder," a controversial 20-foot-tall sculpture that was housed in a Washington D.C. office building, was the first manifestation of Massey's use of social commentary in a public forum.

Featured in every newspaper from the Washington Post and Wall Street Journal to the El Paso Times, "Corporate Ladder" consists of five employees climbing a ladder with a mailroom boy at the bottom and the CEO sitting comfortably at the top. The intermediate figures, a black man, who is stepping on the mailroom boy and grabbing the ankles of a woman who is bent in a provocative pose; and the

woman, who is stealing a document from the vice-president, who is in turn being kicked in the head by the CEO, incited intense controversy around the world.

Another of Massey's pieces, "Case Study," portrays a crack cocaine dealer in Harlem sitting on brownstone steps and wearing expensive tennis shoes and a leather jacket. His head and hands are fashioned out of simulated vials of crack cocaine.

"In the late '80s I lived about 10 blocks from the capital of the crack district. I'd find crack on the streets because deals would go wrong," Massey said. "It's either flipping burgers for \$30 a day or making \$100 a day dealing crack—most likely getting killed or put in jail."

Massey's larger-than-life-sized dealer sits on the steps of a brownstone in a large cage. "He's in a cage because his life is in danger and he can't get out. The cage also represents the danger the neighbors feel," Massey added.

"Checkmate," a chessboard created by Ed Massey in 1991, when the Japanese were at the height of their economic regime, addresses homelessness as well as teen pregnancy, inner-city violence, incarceration and poor education. On one side of the board, the Japanese culture is represented by the emperor and empress standing with a team of bowing Japanese businessmen around them. On the other

side, a homeless woman, a pregnant teen with a child, two apathetic students, two scientists working on defense weaponry, two prisoners, two auto workers and two young men attacking an older man surround the president of the United States and the Statue of Liberty, representing American culture.

"The Japanese are declaring checkmate before the first move. That's why the title is 'Checkmate' in Japanese characters," Bernie Massey, Ed's brother, said. The piece not only sheds light on the social ills of the United States, but on the homogeneity, male chauvinism, and conformity of the Japanese culture.

Ed Massey is currently focusing his energy on a homeless box, a sculpture of a homeless man, a project dealing with ethnic prejudice, two books and Project 9865, a non-profit art therapy program for which hospitalized children are painting canvases that will cloak a 165-foot

oil tower in Beverly Hills.

Massey's homeless box is a corrugated box of which the inner panels have been printed with slogans, such as "Homeless Mother—Please Help," "Homeless and HIV positive" and "Homeless Vet—Will work for food or shelter."

"Have you ever seen someone carry a panel that was not handwritten? No. It's ludicrous—so is the situation," Ed Massey said. Once the Masseys secure funding to manufacture the pre-printed boxes, the boxes will be distributed to the homeless through shelters across the United States.

Not all of Ed Massey's works are as socially conscious as "Corporate Ladder" and "Checkmate." His "Wedding Dress," designed for his wife to wear on their wedding day, is a fantastic feast of sculpted flowers, painted and worn on wheels and his "Welcome to Mexico" is a glass case comprising Pepto Bismol bottles. "Some of the images are very disturbing, like crack cocaine. And then I like satirical, fun stuff," Ed Massey said.

"Fish are a huge part of my life," he added while shaking fish food into an elaborate four-part aquarium, each segment decorated with one of the four seasons to be displayed in Project 9865.

"In the late '80s I lived about 10 blocks from the capital of the crack district. I'd find crack on the streets because deals would go wrong," Massey said. "It's either flipping burgers for \$30 a day or making \$100 a day dealing crack—most likely getting killed or put in jail."

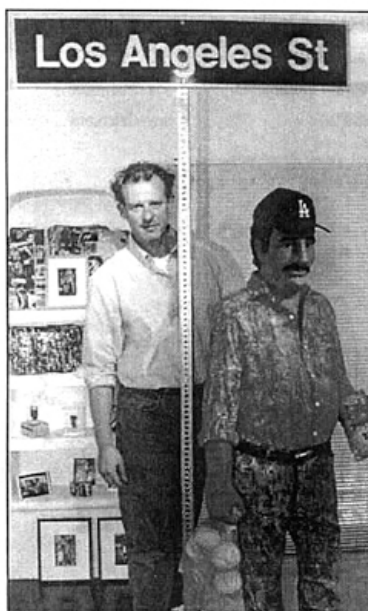


PHOTO BY MEGHAN WARD

Artist Ed Massey with one of his works of art.