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FEATURE

Art For More Than Art's Sake

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 incited intense controversy around the world: 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.

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. "For these guys it's either flipping burgers for \$30 a day or making \$100 a day dealing crack—most likely getting killed or put in jail."

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," Massey said. "The cage also represents the danger the neighbors feel."

"Checkmate," a chessboard created by Ed Massey in 1991, when the Japanese were at the height of an economic boom, 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 in the midst of a team of bowing Japanese businessmen. On the other side, the president of the United States and the Statue of Liberty are surrounded by 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.

"The Japanese are declaring checkmate before the first move. That's why the title is 'Checkmate' in Japanese characters," said Bernie Massey, Ed's brother. 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 with inner panels that 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. His "Welcome to Mexico" is a glass cabinet encasing an array of Pepto Bismol bottles.

"Fish are a huge part of my life," he added while shaking fish food into an



Dawn Massey, Ed's wife, is wearing her wedding dress, designed by Ed.

elaborate four-part aquarium, each segment decorated with one of the four seasons to be displayed in Project 9865.

Said Ed Massey, "Some of the images are very disturbing, like crack cocaine. But I also like satirical, fun stuff."

For more information about Project 9865, visit www.project9865.org on the World Wide Web or call (310) 273-2352.