

Business tenants feel 'moved' by sculpture

Elizabeth Lean

A sculpture of life-size figures scrambling up "The Corporate Ladder" has prompted bitter complaints from tenants of a Columbia office building, some of whom are threatening to move if the artwork remains.

"I think it's sexist and offensive," said Betsy Faulkner, owner of Travel Masters, Inc., one of 35 businesses that rent space in the Lakeview II building in the 9800 block of Broken Land Parkway.

"I find it insulting, a real slap in the face," said Mark Feinberg, president of Consumer First Mortgage on the building's first floor. "This is a business office, and the sculpture is saying business people are ruthless, uncaring, unfeeling people who care only about getting to the top at any cost."

The sculpture consists of five painted plaster figures positioned about an aluminum ladder. A figure of a white man dressed in a uniform and toting a mailbag stands on the floor and reaches toward the ladder's lower rungs. Just above him — the lowest figure on the ladder — is a young black man dressed in a business suit. The black man appears to be pushing down on the mail carrier's head with the palm of one hand.

Poised above the black man is the figure of a young white woman dressed in a business suit, her hand plucking a sheet of paper from a briefcase dangling near her. The owner of the briefcase, a white businessman, clings to the ladder's upper rungs.

An older white businessman — bald with a fringe of white hair — perches at the top, his hands spread benignly over the struggle below.

The sculpture, which is titled "The Corporate Ladder," was installed inside the building's rear atrium entrance last week, said Nanette Wright of Trammell Crow Co., which manages Lakeview II. The building is owned by Principal Mutual Life Insurance Co., based in Des Moines, Iowa.

Wright said the sculpture is a "permanent installation" that was commissioned by Principal Mutual. Another artwork, an arrangement of brightly colored fabric pieces suspended high above the front atrium entrance, was mounted in December, Wright said.

Before workers had even finished installing the ladder sculpture last week, Wright said, her office began receiving complaints and threats not to renew leases. "A woman got irate with my assistant," Wright said. "She demanded to know when the sculpture would be taken down."

Wright said her firm "had nothing to do with" the choice of artwork. "There's a tradition within Principal Mutual to install artwork permanently in the buildings they own," she said.

A Los Angeles art consulting firm worked with Principal Mutual to commission the work by sculptor Ed Massey of New York City. "I took a look at the lobby and made an assessment of what kind of concept might be appropriate," said Elizabeth

Michaels, a consultant who worked on the project.

During a slide presentation of several artists' work, Principal Mutual officials admired an earlier, similar work of Massey's also titled "The Corporate Ladder," Michaels said. "They thought his work was fun."

Michaels said officials commissioned the new sculpture based on "what they believed was appropriate for that lobby and those tenants, on the credibility of the artist, and on what was right for their budget."

Michaels declined to say how much the firm paid for Massey's sculpture.

"I just renewed my lease here, and the rent went up," said Faulkner, the travel agency owner. "It makes me sick that my money went to pay for that."

"It's definitely offensive," Faulkner said. "All you have to do is look at the order, with the white man on top."

"As far as I'm concerned, they should take it down this afternoon," said Feinberg, the mortgage company president, on Tuesday. "I may not

renew my lease if that thing stays up."

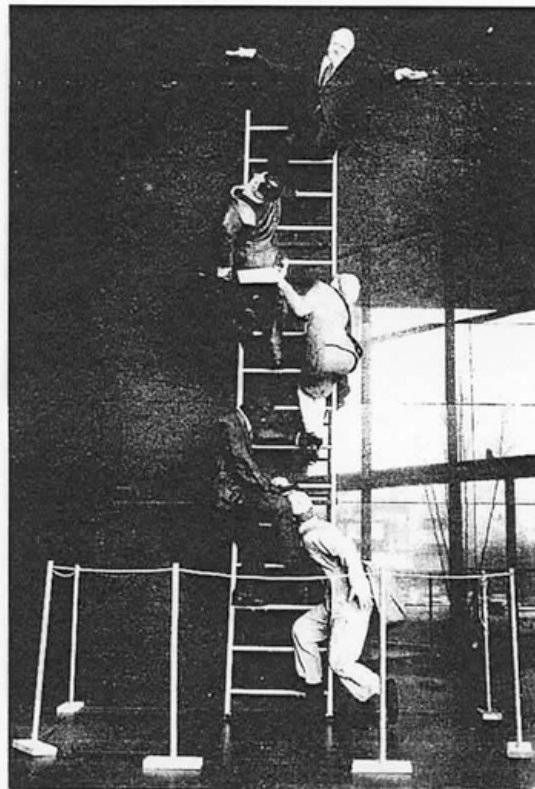
"Where do I fit in?" asked Richard Washington, who was delivering office supplies to a client Tuesday. "I'm black and I'm a laborer. I must be too low even to show. This has a very negative message."

Not everyone agrees. "It's got to be meant as satirical," said Padraic Kennedy, president of the Columbia Association, with offices on the third floor. "To put something called 'The Corporate Ladder' in an office building, it's got to be poking fun and be taken with a certain humor."

The sculpture "makes people stop and think on their entry into the building," Kennedy said. "Perhaps they'll approach their own 'corporate ladder' in a gentler, kinder way."

"I like it," said Gloria Fisch, who gazes out at the sculpture from her post at the Lakeview Deli. "I like all the detail. I think the artist did a fantastic job."

Wright, the property manager, said a reception is planned next month for the building's tenants to meet the artist.



Staff photo by David Hobby

Some tenants in the Lakeview II building say either this recently-installed sculpture leaves the building or they will.