

Columbia tenants climb the walls in anger over satirical sculpture

By Michael J. Clark
Howard County Bureau of The Sun

Ed Massey's satirical sculpture, "Corporate Ladder," which features plaster figures on an 18-foot aluminum ladder, has turned the atrium lobby of a Columbia office building into a buzzing battleground of outrage, ridicule and fascination.

Angry tenants have called it a "slap in the face" to corporate life, insulting and sexist because the woman figure is in a mental role. They want the sculpture, anchored to a wall in the building on Broken Land Parkway, dismantled and replaced.

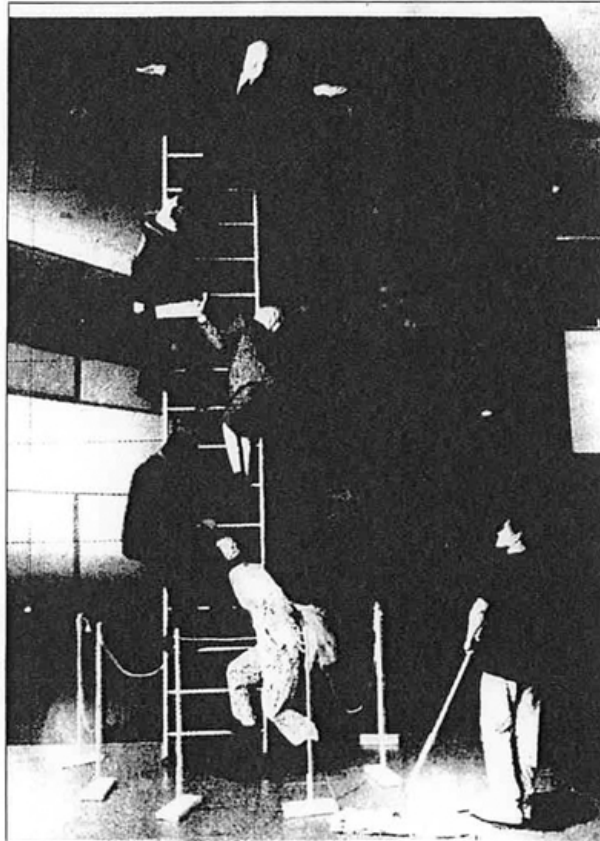
But others, like Padraic Kennedy, president of the Columbia Association, say the work is "a fascinating piece that is bold and dramatic and meant to be satirical."

The uproar has led the building manager to cancel a reception planned next month for the 26-year-old New York City sculptor and to survey the 35 tenants for opinions on whether to keep it.

"I can't go to the bathroom without hearing about the sculpture," complained Nanette Wright, the manager for Trammel Crow Co. The firm recently sold the building to Principal Financial Group of Des Moines, Iowa, which commissioned the sculpture.

"Ed Massey's intention was to challenge the thinking of people's perception of the corporate ladder," argued Ronald C. Hanser, spokesman for Principal Financial.

"It's our policy to decorate our buildings in an attractive way with pieces of art."



THE SUN/KARL M. FERRON

Custodian gazes at corporate life as portrayed in sculpture.

But he said he wanted to talk to property management officials before anyone decides what to do about "Corporate Ladder."

Mr. Massey, who spent 3 1/2 months building the sculpture with the help of seven assistants at his West Harlem studio, said it is "a social commentary" on corporate life.

"I am upset that the sculpture might come down, unless they find a better place for it," he said.

"Maybe the sculpture will serve the purpose of educating people in Columbia about art. Here in New York City or in L.A. it is not unusual to get a piece like this exhibited."

The sculpture features a mailman at the foot of the ladder, a young black man in a business suit near the bottom with a woman holding the papers of a 40ish, white man who is grasping a briefcase. On the top rung is an older, grinning, balding white man.

Mark Feinberg, president of Consumer First Mortgage, whose first-floor office looks out at the sculpture, complained in writing to the building manager that the sculpture shows the business world as "mean, cruel, thoughtless [and] selfish." He said he found it "distasteful and personally offensive."

Ms. Wright said other corporate tenants are not amused, displaying satirical posters that suggest the sculpture is in the lobby because the building owners "could not find pink flamingoes for the lawn."

Although critics have been "very angry," none have said "they will move because of it," she added.