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CALENDAR



RANDY LEFFINGWELL, Los Angeles Times

"Morality/Mortality," an installation by Ed Massey in Santa Monica.

Confronting the Reality and 'Morality' of a Brutal Crime

■ **Art:** Artist Ed Massey and activist Peg Yorkin create an installation depicting the grisly aftermath of a sexual attack.

By SUZANNE MUCHNIC
TIMES ART WRITER

Artist Ed Massey and feminist activist Peg Yorkin have joined forces to provoke a coast-to-coast discussion of rape. In a five-city, monthlong exhibition of "Morality/Mortality"—an installation of life-size painted-polyurethane foam figures that graphically depicts the grisly aftermath of a sexual assault—the Los Angeles-based team hopes to shock their audience into

confronting societal attitudes toward a brutal crime.

In the artwork, which was created by Massey and funded by Yorkin, a female victim rises up on her elbows and attempts to crawl along the ground while her male assailants hang from a beam above her—strung up by their genitals. Nearly identical versions of the piece were unveiled simultaneously on Monday in storefront windows in Santa Monica, Chicago, Miami, Washington and New York.

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'MORALITY': Art Installation

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The Santa Monica installation, in the new Wilshire Medical Building at the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and 15th Street, opened uneventfully as Massey's assistants removed bright blue tarps from a window and revealed the sculpture to a gaggle of admirers and members of the press. But Massey and Yorkin hope that "Morality/Mortality" will generate comment.

"I think we'll hear some screeching brakes," said Yorkin, who (with Eleanor Smeal) co-founded the Fund for the Feminist Majority, a women's rights advocacy group. Yorkin has produced plays in Los Angeles but "Morality/Mortality" is the first visual art project to win her backing.

Passing motorists can see the horrific pair of ghostly white men dangling in the window, but they must get out of their cars to view the anguished woman whose clothing, briefcase and purse are strewn around her. The scene is most dramatic at night, when illuminated by theatrical lighting.

Reached by phone in Miami, where he was overseeing the Florida unveiling, Massey said the artwork was inspired by his female friends' constant fear of attack.

"Some people think it's odd that a male would be concerned with this subject matter," the 30-year-old sculptor said, "but I consider rape to be the most despicable, deplorable of all crimes—no less than murder."

Art's effectiveness as a tool of social change is a topic of ongoing debate in art circles. But Yorkin believes art can make a difference.

"I think this is a subject that needs a great deal more discussion," she said, "and what better way to do it than through this work of art?"

Massey has spent more than two years on the project, casting the figures in plaster from live models, reproducing the casts in polyurethane foam and searching for financial support, as well as a suitable forum. He had hoped to persuade owners of prominently placed buildings to donate space for his artwork, he said, but his efforts were completely unproductive. Both he and Yorkin declined to disclose the cost of the project, but the artist said he created the work with "a bare-bones budget" and the help of many friends.

"It would have been a lot easier to show the piece in a third-floor gallery in Manhattan," he said, "but this has to be in a public area. The work is intended to attract attention and discussion. If it doesn't do that, I've failed."

Massey is a veteran of socially critical art. His past projects include "Corporate Ladder," a satirical interpretation of office politics that set off a storm of protest in 1990, when it was installed in a financial center in Columbia, Md. "Checkmate," another Massey creation, pits robotic Japanese businessmen against dissolute Americans on a giant chess board.

"All my work functions on a social level," he said. "I am a student of my environment."

■ "Morality/Mortality," 1502 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica, through May 29.

Quotable

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—Artist Ed Massey, whose "Morality/Mortality"—an installation of life-size painted-polyurethane foam figures—graphically depicts the grisly aftermath of a sexual assault. F1