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Satire or insult?

Landlord agrees to yank 'Ladder'

Doug Miller

The owners of a local office building have agreed to remove a sculpture that some of the building's tenants claim is racist and sexist.

Michelle Warnke, a spokesman for Principal Mutual Life Insurance Co. of Des Moines, Iowa, said Wednesday the company is removing "The Corporate Ladder" from the Lakeview II building on Broken Land Parkway in Columbia.

"It's a bottom-line decision," Warnke said. "We have to be a responsive and concerned landlord."

Tenant complaints prompted the company to remove the sculpture, which it put in the building earlier this month.

The piece, created by New York artist Ed Massey, depicts five people, all at different points on a ladder. Atop the proverbial ladder of success sits a shrugging, balding white man. Fighting each other to reach his pinnacle are another white man, a white woman and a black man, all in business suits, and a white mail carrier.

Several tenants complained to Trammell Crow Co., which manages the building, that the sculpture perpetuates not only the stereotypical social pecking order, but the image of business people as ambitious, uncaring cutthroats.

Betsy Faulkner, owner of Travel Masters Inc., one of 35 businesses that rent space in the building, takes offense at the sculpture and said she is glad the landlord is removing it.

"I think they made the right decision," Faulkner said.

Others, however, defended the artist, saying the sculpture is a satirical work meant to ridicule racism and sexism in business.

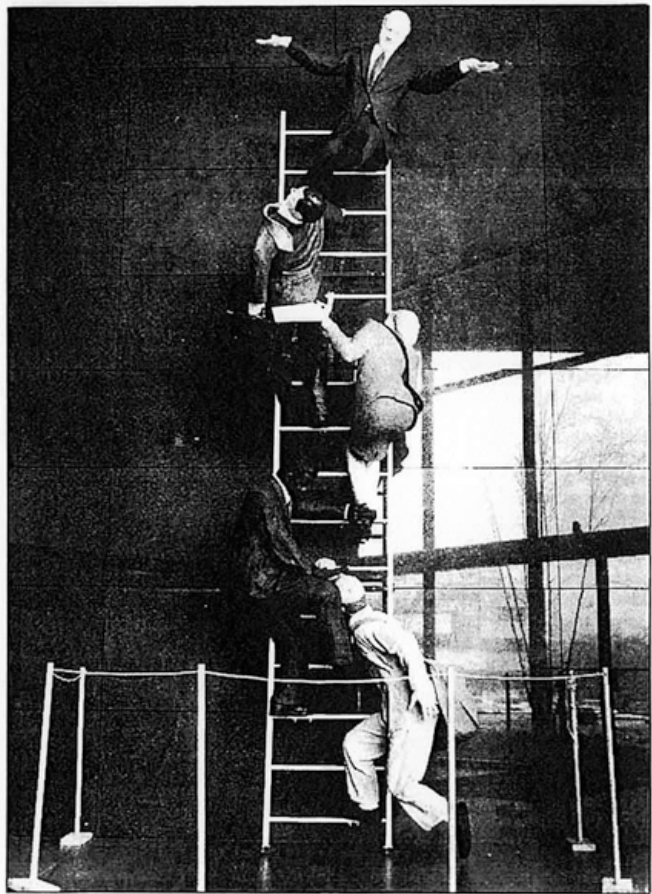
"It's doing what it's supposed to do: getting people to talk," Columbia Association Vice President Pam Mack said.

Mack said she is drafting a letter to Principal Mutual asking the firm to reconsider its decision to remove the work.

"It represents a good satire. It's a reminder of something that shouldn't be. Sometimes it's very important to point out the negative," Mack said. "Most of the people I've talked to are sorry to see it go."

"If it is their decision to remove it, I would hope they're going to replace it. It certainly is not supportive of the arts to simply remove it," Mack added.

Warnke said the Principal Mutual Life is uncertain when it will remove the sculpture, or where the sculpture will go next. She said the company may put the work in its home office in Des Moines.



File photo by David Hobby

The landlord of the Lakeview II building on Broken Land Parkway in Columbia is removing this sculpture following complaints from tenants that it is racist and sexist. Some tenants had threatened to leave unless the art work were removed.