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Banished art turns up in El Paso

Sculptor: 'Corporate Ladder' is accurate

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El Paso Times

A famous — some say infamous — sculpture of corporate America has turned up in El Paso after bitter controversy forced it out of Columbia, Md.

"The Corporate Ladder" by Ed Massey — a 19-foot sculpture of five characters clawing their way up the corporate ladder, each stepping on those below in their struggle for the top — may be displayed permanently in El Paso.

The sculpture was installed Jan. 3 in the lobby of Principal Financial Group's headquarters in Columbia.

It didn't last long.

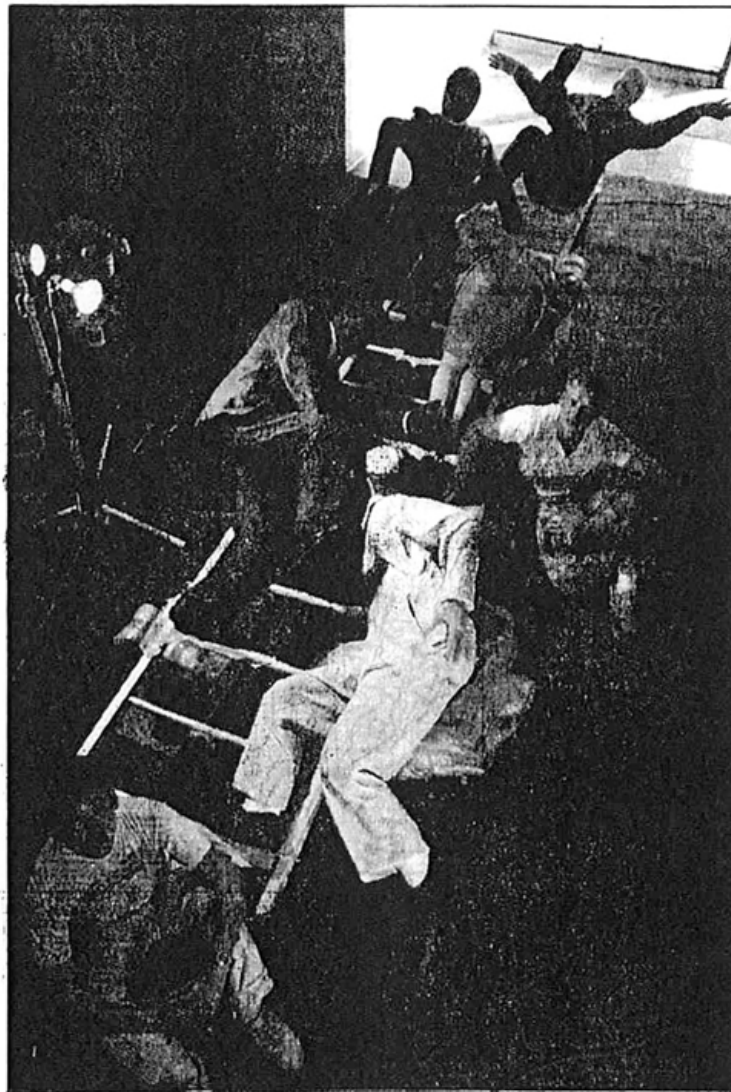
Within a week, complaints from other corporate tenants in the building persuaded Principal Financial to have the piece dismantled. It was removed in May, and El Paso's Bridge Center for Contemporary Art now is looking for a place in El Paso to house the sculpture.

Much of the criticism grew from the depiction of blacks and women being stepped on and stepping on others in a mercilese climb up the ladder.

"People felt the piece wasn't right for a corporate environment," said Massey, a 27-year-old New York artist. "But it is an accurate portrayal of corporate America today."

"The piece shows the imbalance of gender and ethnic makeup of corporate America."

The sculpture includes five plaster figures on an aluminum ladder. At the bottom, Massey said, is a mailroom worker. Pushing him down is a black man in a suit, who's trying to grab the ankle of the woman executive on the next rung up. She's stealing a piece



Joel Salcido / El Paso Times

Sculptor Ed Massey, right, and his assistant Yoji Takenaka spent two days touching up the controversial "The Corporate Ladder" after its arrival in El Paso.

of paper from the briefcase of the man above, who's being kicked down by a man sitting comfortably at the top.

And his hands, the artist said, express "to hell with everyone; look at me up here."

The sculpture is being repaired and stored next to the Bridge Center, 600-A N. Stanton. It arrived in El Paso about two months ago, and the artist arrived Sunday to supervise repairs.

Center director Al Harris said, "The controversy is because it reflects reality — that American corporations are basically run by Anglo males. This reflects the social reality of the American corporation."

"The reason it became controversial is that it was in a building with several corporations, and it made the corporation presidents feel uncomfortable."

Massey refused to say how much the sculpture is worth or how much he was paid by Principal Financial, which commissioned and approved it.

Harris said Principal Financial, after moving the piece from its lobby, began looking for a new home for the sculpture.

He said El Paso stockbroker Ric Rios "saw a story in Fortune magazine about it. He contacted me because his company (Epler, Gueren and Turner) is owned by Principal. He asked if the Bridge might be interested in helping to find a home for it in El Paso."

That search continues.

Meanwhile, the artist was "extremely upset" when he heard the piece was being moved. "I don't think they gave people long enough. In time, criticism would have died down."