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Victor Calzada / El Paso Times

"Morality/Mortality," by Los Angeles artist Ed Massey.

Sculpture sheds light on violence to women

By Coco Ballew
El Paso Times

The Bridge Center for Contemporary Art is tackling violence against women with a graphically realistic sculptural installation.

A woman lies face down on the ground, her purse and briefcase strewn and her underwear and pantyhose around her ankles. She's just been raped and her attackers hang as ghostly figures above her, heavy nooses wrapped around their genitals.

"It took my breath away. I almost started crying. The last time I felt that way was when I saw the Holocaust museum in Miami," Marsha Capen said of the life-sized installation titled "Morality/Mortality" at the Bridge Center for Contemporary Art.

Capen and about 100 others viewed the work during a social-issues forum and literary reading on violence against women Tuesday at the center.

"Some people say, 'Violence against women, we talk about it all the time.' But we can't hear about it enough. And it's important to put it in a neighborhood, where it's not excluded," Edwardo Herrera said.

That's the whole point, according to "Morality/Mortality" creator Ed Massey, 33.

"The focus was not to have a typical museum-goer (see this). I wanted the average Joe on the street to see this," Massey said. He came to El Paso from his home in Los Angeles for the forum.

The installation was inspired by the rape of the roommate of Massey's girlfriend and the ensuing fear his girlfriend felt.

Sculpture

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"It's important to get the public exposed to (the sculpture) and reacting to it. If the viewer is indifferent, then I've failed."

In addition to his girlfriend's experience, the highly publicized rape of the jogger in New York City's Central Park in 1989 compelled Massey to create a work that would throw the issue of violence against women into the public's face.

He wanted to force people of all walks of life to confront the scene of violation in "Morality/Mortality." He sought out storefronts on busy pedestrian thoroughfares in Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York and Washington.

The work did what Massey had hoped — got people thinking and talking about violence against women. Amid the controversy that followed the five-city exposure, one of the storefront windows was covered with spray paint in the middle of the night to mask the installation. But most of the response was positive, according to Massey, particularly from rape victims.

One of the frequent concerns was keeping young children from viewing it, while maintaining an otherwise easy access. He specifically chose locations away from schools or parks — areas that very young children might frequent. But it's his belief that children in the early adolescent years can be exposed to this tough subject matter.

"Have you seen what these kids see on TV? One of the pastors at a church across the street from the D.C. location said 'This is where good parenting comes in,' and I think that's right. A good parent can explain what's happening," Massey said.

Andrea Lopez and Lauren Halliday, both 15 and students at Franklin High School, sat with Brad Brown, 16, and a student at El Paso Country Day School.

Lopez heard about the sculpture on the news and was interested to see this controversial work.

She has a cousin who was raped.

"It was really weird and disturbing (to see the sculpture), Lopez said.

"It makes me more aware (of violence against women). It's good to hear that so many people are concerned, and to see how many people are helping at the battered-women's shelter," Brown said.

Among the forum's panelists were Deborah Turner, community relations director for the El Paso Shelter for Battered Women.

She brought out statistics with shock value to rival that of the sculpture.

- 40,000 to 60,000 cases of domestic violence are reported annually in El Paso. But, the center estimates that figure reflects only one to three cases out of 10. The actual number of instances probably is higher.
- Nationally, one-third of all women seen in emergency rooms recently have been battered.
- Physical abuse injures more women nationwide annually than any other cause.