

Argonaut

Spheres of Hope

Westside artists and school children bring color, optimism and collaborative public art to MacArthur Park Lake

Story and Photo by Christina Campodonico



Some 2,500 inflatable art spheres, many of them painted by Westside kids, will populate MacArthur Park Lake throughout September

If you happen to be driving along Wilshire Boulevard and think you're seeing thousands of giant, brightly colored beach balls floating on MacArthur Park Lake, you aren't imagining things.

Those huge inflatable orbs are actually part of a massive community art project led by brothers Ed and Bernie Massey and their Santa Monica-based nonprofit Portraits of Hope.

For "The Spheres at MacArthur Park," Portraits of Hope installed 200 of these floatables at the park on Saturday, with as many as 2,500 more expected to fill the lake before the end of this week. At the launch celebration, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti gave a dedication that thanked civic leaders and community partners for connecting the city to this "crazy idea."

Putting thousands of large, rainbow-hued spheres into a lake in the middle of Los Angeles might indeed sound a little nutty, but there was careful method and deep meaning behind the seeming madness.

For Ed Massey, the project's conceptual artist, MacArthur Park "had all the perfect ingredients."

Known for transforming blimps, oil derricks and airplanes into vibrant works of public art, Massey said he'd been playing with the idea of a "water-born art project" for about seven years but had yet to find the ideal spot — an urban lake with warm enough weather to keep the vinyl spheres from deflating.

Massey considered New York's Central Park and even a lake in Poland. Then, while visiting the MacArthur Park neighborhood, he noticed that the park's iconic lake "is not only one that is frequently seen, but also one that is frequently not visited," he said. Once a destination for its charming pedal boats, MacArthur Park has struggled with gang violence since the mid-1980s, though the problem has lessened in recent years.

The park's somewhat hidden history and its high visibility in a densely populated pocket of L.A. made it a perfect setting for a project focused on beautification and revitalization in an urban setting, Massey said.

But location is only one half of the foundation's artistic vision. Civic engagement is the other.

From painting New York City taxicabs to California lifeguard towers, each project has a socially minded mission. Run entirely by volunteers and funded solely through private donations and sponsorships, Portraits of Hope uses their massive art projects to bring creative therapies to sick and disabled children in hospitals and social services programs. They also incorporate interdisciplinary civics lessons into every painting session.

For "The Spheres at MacArthur Park" about 10,000 volunteers from all over Southern California participated in hand-painting the four- to six-foot inflatable orbs, among them kids from Shriners Children's Hospital in Westlake and students from dozens of Westside schools.

In addition to the aid of volunteers, Massey is quick to point out that the project would not have been possible without the help of Los Angeles Police Commission President Steve Soboroff, who brought the project to Garcetti's attention. The Portraits of Hope proposal got the green light from the mayor's office in December.

For Soboroff it was a no-brainer. The Massey brothers have demonstrated talent in pulling off large-scale public art projects, and this concept's "positive social ramifications" for MacArthur Park and the high "art benefit" to underserved, at-risk and special needs youth made it an ideal civic art project to support.

"How could I not let the mayor and the Parks and Recreation Department and the LAPD know about something like this? It goes along with everybody's aspirations for a better Los Angeles," Soboroff said. "It's as pure as pure gets."

Soboroff also saw the public art installation as encouragement for Angelenos to get out of their "little two-mile sphere" and explore another part of Los Angeles.

Ed Massey also believes that the spheres have the potential to reintroduce people to this historic park that he used to visit with his brother as a child.

"It's going to bring that community that has not been to MacArthur Park, or passed it quickly, to now step foot in it," Ed Massey said.

His collaborator, older brother and Portraits of Hope co-founder Bernie Massey, seconds that idea.

“We thought we could provide a service and an opportunity to not only revitalize the park but really build bridges and build communities,” Bernie Massey said. “We wanted to do something that involved every population sector in Los Angeles.”

Part of that cross-community building is evident in the spheres themselves, many of which began their journey in Portraits of Hope’s donated El Segundo studio space before traveling to the Westlake neighborhood.

“Every sphere has a story,” the elder Massey told me during the launch on Saturday, referring to the hope, joy and healing that the spheres’ floral designs represent. Textured spheres painted by visually impaired children from The Braille Institute are particularly special to him.

“Whenever I see a Braille sphere, that means something to me,” Bernie Massey said as he looked out onto the lake.

Westside Neighborhood School students played a key role in the creation of these textured spheres. Not only did the WNS group prepare the spheres with pumice so that the visually impaired could feel their way through the canvases, in June about 25 middle schoolers from the Playa Vista-adjacent campus visited the Braille Institute near downtown Los Angeles.

There, WNS students worked hand-in-hand with children from the Braille Institute, helping them paint the spheres and identify color combinations. Rob Young, who teaches eighth grade social studies at WNS and is the school’s service learning coordinator, recalls that field trip being very special.

“It’s very gratifying and humbling to see our students ... connect with their peers and to engage in the same task together side-by-side,” said Young. “It’s one thing to talk about empathy and cooperation in the classrooms and another thing to see it organically unfolding.”

That ripple effect is already starting to make small waves. Cynthia Cuellar, a high school student in the Heart of Los Angeles (HOLA) program, which provides enrichment programs to underserved youth, was excited to see some of her spheres bobbing in the lake on Saturday.

“I’m just proud to know that I added a bit of color to Los Angeles,” said Cuellar, who lives a few blocks away from the park.

MacArthur Park will continue to shimmer with color over the next month. After that, the spheres will be donated to schools, hospitals and social service organizations.

Until then, where some may see beach balls, Ed Massey sees hope and beauty in the park and its surrounding community, “like a garden in full bloom.”

Learn more at portraits ofhope.org.