

# ART and living

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## public art

# A Message for the Masses

Ed Massey's canvases are huge, but he gets a little help from some friends

by Lars Carlson

Along the western edge of Los Angeles' Century City skyline rises a unique tower of color and light. To the Angeleno stuck in traffic on Olympic Boulevard, this florally adorned beacon is a zesty addition to the cityscape, a breath of fresh air along an otherwise ordinary drive. Yet to visionary artist Ed Massey, the tower is a culmination of years of trials, tribulations, and one very grand idea.

Rewind to 1995. While on a run near this same stretch of road, a young Massey noticed an unsightly oil derrick marring what was for the most part a picturesque view. With a history of public art in his background, the provocative sculptor took note and, following a chance visit to a children's ward of a local hospital, saw an opportunity to rethink his role as a public artist.

"After visiting hospitals and seeing kids were painting and drawing...I found out the panels [of the derrick] were removable," Massey recounts. "Those panels were painted on the ground. Anyone can paint them. Here's a structure that is 170 feet in height, and there are kids that are in total isolation from the world. Why not bring the panels of the building to them?" he thought.

And with that, Massey spearheaded a massive undertaking—dubbed Project 9865—in which panels of the derrick were removed and sent to hospitals around California. Seriously ill and physically disabled children were able to paint the individual panels that, when brought together, would form the project's *Tower of Hope*.

"It was the first program of its kind in the world," says Massey, recalling the difficulties he had in getting many on board his Project 9865 train. "No one embraced us immediately. It was very grassroots. That was probably our most difficult installation ever."

Completed in 2000, the strikingly graceful floral patterns of the *Tower's* design provide a flagship icon for Portraits of Hope—a collaboration between Massey and his brother Bernie—devoted, as the company's mission statement declares, to "unifying families and communities through the arts."



Above: A young artist utilizes one of Portraits of Hope's telescope paintbrushes. For the program's specialized needs, Massey also devised a shoe paintbrush for those unable to paint with their arms and a fruit-flavored mouth brush for artists who are unable to paint with either their hands or their feet. Photo courtesy Portraits of Hope.



Left: While Portraits of Hope's projects feature children as their creators, Massey isn't afraid of throwing a brush (or in this case a mop) on the canvas himself. Photo courtesy Portraits of Hope.



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*Syncopation*, Ed Massey.  
2005. Photo courtesy  
Portraits of Hope.



*Ameriquet Soaring Dreams Airship*, façade by Ed Massey. 2005. Photo courtesy Portraits of Hope.



*Tower of Hope*, façade by Ed Massey. 2000.  
Photo courtesy Portraits of Hope.



*Garden in Transit: Airborne*, façade by Ed Massey. 2003. Image courtesy Portraits of Hope.

Since the *Tower*'s completion, Portraits of Hope has gone on to do more installations of gargantuan proportion. In 2005, Massey put the finishing touches on *Syncopation*, an epic mural adorning the side of a previously bland corner of downtown Culver City, California.

Not even the sky is the limit for the Southern California-based organization. 2003 saw the take off—literally—of Portraits of Hope's *Garden in Transit: Airborne*, a collaboration with NASA upon the centennial celebration of manned flight.

And *Airborne* was just the prelude. The organization's most recent endeavor had Massey designing the 40,000 square foot façade of the *Ameriquet Soaring Dreams Airship*. "The airship is considered now the largest flying public art piece anywhere in the world!" Massey extolls. In keeping with Portraits of Hope tradition, Massey again worked in conjunction with ill and disabled children on the blimp, and has expanded involvement to include other community-based programs for children and adults as well.

While many of Portraits of Hope's projects have emphasized the floral motif inspired by the *Tower of Hope*, Massey used the *Airship* as a chance to stay artistically fresh. "We wanted to do something different," he says. "Ameriquet is a mortgage company, so I had everyone sit down and take out a sheet of paper and a pencil and I said 'I want everyone to draw a home.' Everyone drew their house the same. They all used geometric shapes." Using the experiment as inspiration, Massey "shaped" a marvelously playful collage in-the-round that breaks the mold of the corporately-branded airship.

On the horizon for Massey is an equally bold project in the works at New York's Chelsea Piers. "We're working on painting a historical tugboat that will actually travel on the Hudson River in May," he says. The tugboat will complement a vivacious new 25,000 square foot façade of the entire Chelsea Piers complex, which will include a number of 13' by 13' panels, each painted by teams of ten to twelve children. "They design it, create it, and color it. All we do is varnish it," Massey says of the panels.

From Los Angeles to New York to the skies above, Portraits of Hope's public portfolio sends a unique message. "The unimaginable can be accomplished," Massey says. "This is about giving back life, hope, and inspiration."