

For Muralist Kent Twitchell, It's Artwork Lost, Artwork Found

by Richard Guzmán | Posted: Monday, March 26, 2012 6:15 am

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES -Inside his spacious studio in a building near Downtown, famed muralist Kent Twitchell has covered a wall with a handful of colorful images of people ready to cast votes.

The acrylic designs have nothing to do with the upcoming state ballots or the November presidential election. Instead, they are homages to that past that, in a few months, will be revealed to Downtowners. At the same time, the works will mark a return to the community for an artist who six years ago endured a well-publicized setback.

The images, consisting mostly of veterans or others associated with the military, including his own father, will make up one of three murals that Twitchell was commissioned to create for the Bob Hope Patriotic Hall. The building at 1816 S. Figueroa St. is undergoing a \$45 million county-funded renovation, and as part of it, Twitchell will replace the “lost” murals created by Helen Lundeberg in 1942 (the year Twitchell was born).

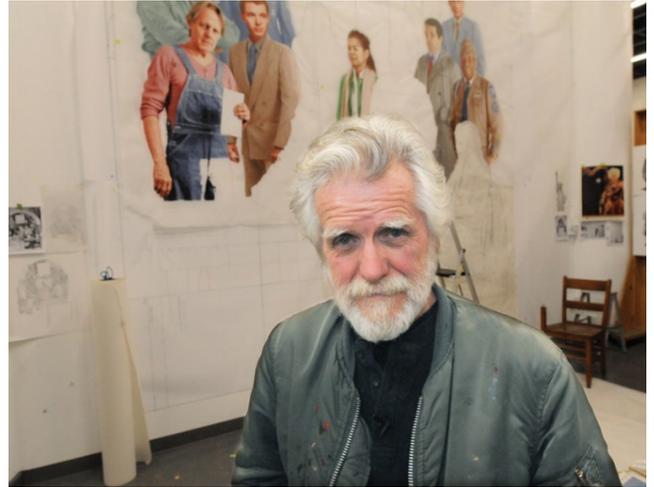
“I try to make each portrait look like a monument to that person,” Twitchell said last Tuesday, speaking to more than a dozen people who had gathered at his studio near USC for a sneak peak at the unfinished artworks.

In 2010, Twitchell won a \$285,000 commission to create the murals. The 12-by-15-foot paintings will be completed in time for the fall reopening of the Patriotic Hall, which will again house the county’s Department of Military and Veterans Affairs.

“The goal is for individuals who come and use this facility to remember the role of the military in preserving the values of democracy,” said Letitia Ivins, assistant director of Civic Art for the L.A. County Arts Commission. “It’s also to show the diversity of those that served.”

Permanent Mark

Twitchell is an Air Force veteran known for large-scale creations. His Downtown work includes



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Kent Twitchell in front of the unfinished “Free Ballot,” one of three murals he is working on for the renovation of Bob Hope Patriotic Hall. The artworks will replace “lost” murals created by Helen Lundeberg in 1942.

“Harbor Freeway Overture,” which overlooks the 110 Freeway on the side of the Figat7th shopping center and depicts members of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra.

Many people know Twitchell for an incident that occurred in 2006. One morning, his 70-foot-tall “Ed Ruscha Monument,” which adorned a building at 1031 S. Hill St., was whitewashed by a work crew preparing the structure for its future as the YWCA Job Corps Center.

The paint-over of the 1987 artwork sparked an uproar, including charges that Twitchell had no advance notice and thus no chance to preserve the piece he spent nearly a decade creating. Litigation followed, and in 2008 Twitchell won a \$1.1 million settlement from the federal government and 12 other defendants, including the YWCA of Greater Los Angeles.

His current project is painted on thin paper and clipped to a wall that faces his cluttered desk, which is buried under scattered papers and a bucket filled with colored pencils.

Near his desk are pictures and sketches of the Ruscha mural, which for Twitchell is a reminder of the importance of his current project. He knows he is replacing another artist’s work while hoping to cement his own legacy in a protected setting.

“It was when I lost ‘Ed Ruscha’ that this project came along, and that caused me to think about doing this work,” Twitchell reflected. “I’m 70 and pretty soon I’m not going to be able to do this anymore, so it’ll be nice to have one left.”

Lundeberg’s original murals, created in the midst of World War II, depicted historic elements and some basic rights of citizens of the United States. “The Preamble to the Constitution” showed some of the founding fathers flanking said document under the Statue of Liberty. “Free Ballot” and “Free Assembly” portrayed, respectively, people ready to vote and people speaking at a public meeting.

Although Lundeberg’s art was highly praised, the murals were removed in the 1970s. Later, they were misplaced, hence their description as “lost” artworks.

“Kent had a lot of empathy for Helen, having lost murals too,” Laura Zucker, the executive director of the L.A. Arts Commission, told the group gathered at his studio.

Wearing a green bomber jacket with paint-splattered sleeves, the gray-haired and bearded artist explained that he approached the project as if he were on a team with Lundeberg. His vision, he said, follows the same basic idea as the art created 70 years ago. Like Lundeberg’s work, Twitchell’s pieces will show scenes with a few different positions, though with new bodies and faces. He took most of the pictures of the models himself.

Twitchell said he hopes his work does justice to veterans and the country.

“I’m one of those square, old-fashioned people,” he said. “I love this country, I get tears in my eyes when I hear the Pledge of Allegiance and the National Anthem. So this is an opportunity for me to do

a major mural that I can honor America with.”

Once the murals are completed on the thin paper, they will be transferred to a thicker canvas that in turn will be attached to the walls in the lobby of the Patriotic Hall. After they are moved, Twitchell will add the finishing touches to the works, which he hopes will remain in place a lot longer than some of his previous pieces.

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