

Dave Newhouse: A unique sculpture for Oakland

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SOMETIMES you wonder how Oakland — with problems in the mayor's office and Police Department, and in dealing with its sports teams and in keeping its streets safe — makes any progress.

But amid the violence, cover-ups, indecision and infighting, Oakland's Uptown is surging. It has new restaurants and a restored Fox Theater to bookend the Paramount Theatre — which is another state-of-the-art palace saved from the wrecking ball.

Well, haphazard Oakland will defy its critics once more a year from now when "Remember Them: Champions for Humanity," a one-of-a-kind sculpture, is unveiled in a new downtown park just down the block from the Fox.

Oakland sculptor Mario Chiodo is building a massive art piece depicting 26 worldly humanitarians from the past 150 years, from Abraham Lincoln and Chief Joseph to Mahatma Gandhi and Maya Angelou. Target date for the finished bronzed sculpture is February 2010.

Chiodo, 47, first had this abstract vision in mind as a youngster in Oakland.

"Could I create something that would bring people together, and that could inspire people, though I didn't know what that idea looked like?" he recalled Tuesday.

The concept really took shape in the aftermath of terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The result is expected to be the first sculpture in the United States portraying a global diversity of races.

The sculpture will include the following historical figures: Mother Teresa, Winston Churchill, Oskar Schindler, Nelson Mandela, Thich Nhat Hanh, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Helen Keller, Cesar Chavez, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Coretta Scott King, Malcolm X and Harvey Milk.

Others being honored: Frederick Douglass, Ralph Abernathy, Elie Wiesel, Susan B. Anthony, Rigoberta Menchu, Shirin Ebadi, Ruby Bridges, a Tiananmen Square student, and a 26th figure Chiodo hasn't revealed.

And to think he started with a list of "hundreds."

"I asked myself, 'Who meant anything to you? Who inspired you?' he said of the narrowing process. "These people made a difference because they gave up their lives to help other lives. That is the common thread, why they're all there."

The idea of peace — those who believed in it and worked to achieve it — additionally influenced Chiodo's thinking as he decided which people to include.

"Only through peace can we achieve peace," he said.

The artwork will be 79 feet wide and 25 feet tall — and the \$7 million cost will be privately funded.

It's an incredible undertaking.

Seeing its development in detailed accuracy, figure by figure, in Chiodo's West Oakland studio only lends to the anticipation of its public viewing.

Though huge in size, the sculpture can be disassembled and reassembled "like a three-dimensional puzzle," Chiodo said. There will be an accompanying plaque about each individual, some with quotes, for visitors to peruse.

Chiodo's work is so important to him that he has pulled back from other projects at Chiodo Art Development to devote his time to the 26-figure monument. This means working extra hours at night and on weekends, while still trying to be a husband and father.

"I can't even tell you where I've gotten the energy, but I just knew I had to do that," he said.

Born in West Oakland, Chiodo was 11 when a teacher put a blob of clay in front of him. He remembers that moment as "magical," realizing then he wanted to be a sculptor. A Piedmont High School graduate, he dropped out of college after one semester to take a job with a low-budget movie company, making creatures during the "Star Wars" era.

Chiodo's creatures appeared in a movie called "Dracula's Disciple."

As his own boss in his 20s, he began building his art portfolio, which includes a jazz sculpture in New Orleans, museum dioramas, exterior play elements for children, comical statues for theme restaurants and casinos. Added up, these are multimillion-dollar projects. He still works in clay, mostly making models.

After "Remember Them" is cast in bronze in a foundry, a copy of the original will be placed at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tenn., in the building that was once the Lorraine Motel, where King was assassinated in 1968. A second copy will be sent across the nation as a traveling exhibit.

Each of Chiodo's 26 figures will be three times his or her normal size. Roosevelt will be shown sitting in his wheelchair.

"I tried to capture what he was thinking," the sculptor said.

Since starting the project, Chiodo has been visited by Martin Luther King III, who told Chiodo that his father's likeness is the best he has ever seen sculpted. Chiodo said he was pleased to hear that because King was the most difficult figure to capture as he "went through physical changes in the last three years of his life with all the stress. I sculpted his head 11 times over."

Beginning with the drawings of the project, Chiodo has been working on it for 20 years, though he didn't know where it was leading him until Sept. 11 "brought it all together."

"And this project shows what can be done when people come together," Chiodo said.

The Oakland way, awkwardly, but somehow successful.

Dave Newhouse's columns appear Mondays, Thursdays and Sundays, usually on the Metro page. Know any Good Neighbors? Call 510-208-6466 or e-mail dnewhouse@bayareanewsgroup.com.

How to help:

The "Remember Them" project is funded privately, but donations are needed to complete the sculpture. Contributions can be made through www.remember-them.org.