L.A.’s Freeway Lady moves to the San Fernando Valley

By Dana Bartholomew
dana.bartholomew@langnews.com
@DN_DanaBart on Twitter

For years, a Los Angeles septuagenarian cast a comforting gaze upon millions of 101 Freeway commuters downtown. Now the beloved Freeway Lady mural by artist Kent Twitchell — twice obliterated from its original location — has been recreated in the car-crazed San Fernando Valley. The 30-by-22-foot mural will be dedicated Thursday at a new home at Los Angeles Valley College.

“Every time I was going to try to put her some place it would fall through,” said Twitchell, 73, now moving from downtown L.A. to Long Beach, of his most famous mural. “But then came L.A. Valley College. It was the perfect place. I think she’s happy there.”

The original “Old Woman of the Freeway” mural, as was dubbed when painted in 1974, looked down from the Angeles Prince Hotel in Echo Park onto the Hollywood Freeway.

The mural showed a white-haired, clear-eyed woman cloaked in a resplendent afghan that flowed behind her to frame a moon in a black night sky.

She was among the first of what came to be dozens of Los Angeles murals by Twitchell — and an homage to his grandmother Marie, who helped raise him on a farm outside Lansing, Mich.

In painting what came to be known as the Freeway Lady, the Midwestern artist had bucked everything hip in 1970s art. And in a glamour town that worshipped youth, his acrylics bore the likeness of character actress Lillian Bronson — a character actress well into her 70s.

But it wasn’t long before L.A. rose up against its largest senior. A parking garage was built to obscure her bottom half. A billboard company white-washed her in 1986. Then when she was being repainted after a legal settlement, L.A.’s taggers killed off the Freeway Lady with graffiti.

For years, Twitchell tried to revive the old girl, to no avail.

Twelve years ago, a plan to rehang her outside the Valley Institute of Visual Art in Sherman Oaks died when a property owner refused to allow the artist access. Meanwhile, at least one resident had called the old woman “evil and satanic.”

Then L.A. Valley College beekoned her with open arms — with a $180,000 offer to recreate her courtesy of a voter-approved community colleges bond-building program.

A new afghan model was created by the Crochet Guild of Sacramento. A flying afghan streamer was created by Peggy Baxter of Long Beach. And students and residents joined to paint a portion of the new Freeway Lady on the Student Services Center overlooking Fulton Avenue.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony will take place at 5:30 p.m., followed by a screening of a new documentary on the Freeway Lady.

“This newly repainted ‘Freeway Lady’ mural marks a second chance at life for one of the most iconic murals in Los Angeles,” said Dr. Erika Enderjonas, president of Los Angeles Valley College, in a statement. “I couldn’t be more thrilled to have her here at Valley College.”

But is the “kinder” looking Lillian Bronson looking alike still the Freeway Lady of Los Angeles?

“I think the Valley is a great place for her to retire,” Twitchell said. “When I was growing up, it’s where all the movie stars lived.

“She could be the ‘Lady of the Valley’ or ‘The Valley College Lady.’” Or quite possibly, he added, “Fulton Avenue Lady” in Valley Glen.