ART; THE CITY IS HIS CANVAS; Kent Twitchell gets a rare chance to restore key L.A. murals

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Abstract: Last month the artist announced he would be repainting his famous "Ed Ruscha Monument" at a new location: the American Hotel in the arts district of downtown L.A. He'd spent more than a decade creating the original 70-foot-tall mural, which adorned a Hill Street building for almost 20 years.

Full text: With his shock of silver hair, snowy beard and paint-spattered blue jeans, Kent Twitchell races around his downtown L.A. art studio, giving a tour. The searingly bright loft feels like a kaleidoscopic time warp, the stark, white walls a prism of murals, all from different time periods, all at different stages of production. Against one wall, Twitchell's pencil sketch of the artist Ed Ruscha is taped to a cardboard model of a building; the 1987 mural was destroyed in 2006 but is coming back to life, re-imagined. Against another wall, a new mural is starting up: The enormous, partly painted faces of Special Olympics ambassadors Rafer Johnson and Loretta Claiborne are taking shape on long spools of paper that dangle from the ceiling and drape the concrete floor. Across the room, there's a coagulation of sketches and face studies for a redux of Twitchell's 1974 "The Freeway Lady." Her giant, wrinkled hand clutches a multicolored afghan that nearly fills the south side of the studio.

"We lose so many things, like trees and buildings," Twitchell says as Rachmaninoff, his favorite, blasts from the stereo. "To have something from our past, that began to mean something to us in the city, come back and be appreciated -- it's kind of a magical thing."

At 72, Twitchell has five mural projects -- new commissions and the resurrection of significant early works -- that form a key moment in his career. Last month the artist announced he would be repainting his famous "Ed Ruscha Monument" at a new location: the American Hotel in the arts district of downtown L.A. He'd spent more than a decade creating the original 70-foot-tall mural, which adorned a Hill Street building for almost 20 years. The mural was whitewashed, without Twitchell's permission, by a work crew renovating the future YWCA Job Corps Center. He's longed to repaint it ever since, and when he does, the new mural will depict an older Ruscha.

"I got a little nervous when he said he'd depict me as I look today," Ruscha jokes. "Seriously, Kent's a great artist, one of a kind, a great muralist. And I'll feel elevated up on that wall."

Twitchell is also part of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's current "Drawing in L.A.: The 1960s and 70s" show. Pieces of his little-seen Michael Jackson mural, painted in the early '90s but never installed, are on display at the Museum of the San Fernando Valley; and he's part of Couturier Gallery's "L.A. Muralists: In Their Studios II."

In an age when public murals often carry personal and political messages, Twitchell's work is a throwback of sorts to a more innocent, pre-World War II era. His towering works on the sides of urban buildings are proudly, purposefully non-narrative and without a pointed agenda. Twitchell -- one of L.A.'s most established muralists but also something of an earnest outsider among outsider street artists -- paints straightforward monuments to arts, sports world and pop cultural heroes, typically depicting his subjects staring directly, "protectively," down at the viewer.

During the last four decades, Twitchell has created more than 30 large-scale portraits around the country, including Philadelphia's "Julius Erving Monument," celebrating basketball legend Dr. J, and Cleveland's "Ruby Dee," an ode to the late actress and writer. His work is included in the permanent collections of LACMA, the
Chicago Art Institute and the Smithsonian. But mostly, Twitchell has concentrated on downtown L.A. and its concrete canvases.

As is the fleeting nature of street art, many of these works no longer exist, but more than a dozen of Twitchell's murals are still up -- often seen from major freeway intersections, familiar landmarks to Angelenos traversing the city. The downtown works have presided over an area that has undergone seismic identity shifts, from a largely deserted and "pretty shabby" urban pocket in the '60s, as Twitchell describes it, to one of L.A.'s cultural epicenters. His first signed mural, 1971's "Steve McQueen Monument," still adorns the side of an old Victorian-style house at 12th and Union streets; his "Jim Morphesis" and "Lita Albuquerque" diptych, part of the 1984 Olympic mural series showing the artists' faces with their palms splayed out by their cheeks, was restored along the 101 Freeway in 2011-12; and his three-panel "Harbor Freeway Overture," featuring Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra members in formal attire clutching their instruments, has accompanied commuters on the northbound 110 Freeway downtown since it went up in 1991.

"I like to do things that are simple and old-fashioned," Twitchell says. "Today it's fashionable that [public art] has a lot of activity, a lot of color. In the midst of all that, mine is very still, minimal. In the '70s, there was a lot of conceptual art and art that was cynical. So then, I wanted to do just the opposite -- something authentic, from the farm, reflective of who I really was."

Twitchell grew up on a Michigan farm that was passed down from his great-great grandfather. He milked cows and drove tractors, but he also drew pictures from age 3. His first portrait, of Roy Rogers, was copied from a comic book. His uncle, a sign painter, taught him the lost art of one-stroke lettering, and he painted the backs of neighborhood trucks and cars for pocket change throughout high school.

"I got used to my stuff being seen publicly," he says. "I dreamed of being a commercial artist growing up, but I have trouble doing other people's ideas. So I became a fine artist by default."

Twitchell joined the Air Force at 17 because it had positions for illustrators. That took him to London, where he illustrated and lettered top secret briefings for internal communications presentations.

The British castles and cathedrals he saw there had a profound effect on his art.
"I liked the scale," he says. "You'd look up at them and they were so dramatic. They made you feel small but good, significant."

Soon after moving to L.A. in the '60s to study art at East Los Angeles College, then Cal State L.A. and, later, graduate school at Otis, Twitchell started creating multistory murals.

"If I'd lived in San Francisco or Boston, I probably never would have painted murals," says Twitchell, who still lives downtown. "But I just had a feeling L.A. needed me in the '60s. Except for a few enclaves, L.A. was a city in progress, on its way to becoming something. I thought: I can make it better, I can make it more beautiful." While getting dressed for his stepdaughter's wedding in Sausalito, Twitchell got a call that the Ruscha mural was being whitewashed. He tried to stay calm. "You learn to restrain your emotions when you're working on the streets," he says. "But it created a real vacuum, an unnecessary sucking of aesthetic wind right out of my soul." Twitchell sued and in 2008 won a $1.1-million settlement from the federal government and the YWCA of Greater Los Angeles, among other defendants. "It was the largest settlement for public art in the country," says Twitchell, who hopes the victory sent a message about artists' rights: "That there are people who value public art, that it isn't just something you can paint out, like you paint out vandalism."

Unlike the earlier, full-body Ruscha portrait, the new, 30-foot-tall work portrays a tighter crop on Ruscha's face as he leans forward on his elbows, the rooftop of the adjacent building as a table top. Twitchell, who works off of photographs, re-shot Ruscha in May.

"He has a certain wisdom, a certain experience in his face. He's much more interesting-looking now," Twitchell says. "Plus, I'm a better painter now. I want to turn him into a real downtown L.A. icon. I want him to be breathing up there."

Twitchell begins painting the mural this month and hopes to install it in the fall.
The piece is "a seminal mural by a seminal artist," Councilman Jose Huizar says of the original Ruscha work. Twitchell now "has the opportunity to recapture work that helped solidify his place among Los Angeles' greatest muralists."

Twitchell's 30-foot mural commemorating this month's Special Olympics World Games in Los Angeles will go up on a vacant building on Hope Street, between 10th and 11th, in early July. The artist plans to climb the scaffolding and help install the mural.

A re-imagining of his 1974 "The Freeway Lady" is being installed on the Student Services Building at L.A. Valley College. The work, originally visible to northbound drivers on the Hollywood Freeway near downtown, was painted over in 1986 by an advertising company without Twitchell's permission. It depicts actress Lillian Bronson, whom he chose because she reminded him of his great-grandmother.

Working from photographs of his Otis mentor, Twitchell is planning a "Charles White Monument" on the south wall of a LACMA satellite gallery at Charles White Elementary School.

Twitchell's little-seen ode to Michael Jackson is also resurfacing. While painting the 10-story portrait in the early '90s, Twitchell made numerous visits to Jackson's Neverland Ranch, and the two visited the intended mural site at the El Capitan Theatre in Hollywood. But in 1993, around the time Jackson was accused of child molestation, the mural was put on hold. Now the Museum of the San Fernando Valley is working to have the mural installed on the east side of the Courtyard by Marriott in Sherman Oaks, facing the 405 Freeway. "It would be a world magnet to people by the millions, but my hope is that it would be something positive and healing about his legacy," Twitchell says of Jackson.

About his larger oeuvre, literally cemented around the city, Twitchell adds: "It's just so satisfying to know that you've contributed to the environment of the town that you live in -- to provide something positive," he says. "I still believe in art that uplifts, in art that reflects the better part of us. I still believe in heroes."

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Illustration

Caption:
PHOTO: KENT TWITCHELL stands with a sketch of a mural of artist Ed Ruscha. The original was destroyed in 2006; the re-imagined one is being prepped for downtown L.A.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Brian van der Brug Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: "HARBOR FREEWAY OVERTURE," a Kent Twitchell mural from the '90s, is best seen from the northbound Harbor Freeway at 8th Street in downtown L.A.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Gil Ortiz; PHOTO: "THE FREWAY LADY" from 1974 has been re-imagined for the Student Services Building at L.A. Valley College. The original mural, on West Temple Street downtown and visible from the Hollywood Freeway, was painted over in 1986.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Gil Ortiz; PHOTO: STRIPS of the Michael Jackson mural surround Twitchell in 2009. Plans are afoot to install it in Sherman Oaks. Portions are now on display in Northridge.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Ann Johansson For The Times; PHOTO: "ED RUSCHA MONUMENT," a 1987 Kent Twitchell mural, stood until 2006 at 1031 S. Hill St. It is being reenvisioned for a new location in downtown L.A.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Melba Levick; PHOTO: PORTIONS of "Special Olympics Monument" while still in the studio.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Kent Twitchell

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