

Internationally Acclaimed Local Sculptor Nijel Strives to Elevate Art



By **FRANK RENEAU**
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Nijel BPG is far more than an artist for hire. His mission is to become art.

His work has been seen by many, though most have not been able to associate a face to the hands that have crafted works that are now renowned. But through art Nijel has made a name for himself and introduced another hue in the spectrum. An accomplished sculptor, his commissioned works place him at the top of an elite group of artists whose works adorn public attention all over the world.

But like any interpretation of art, there is much more to Nijel than the products of his labor. His continuous climb has been filled with the struggle associated with anyone intent on creating the best work that transcends time and tolerance.

Born in England, Nijel moved to New Jersey with his family in the 1960s. He learned to fight formally, through the martial arts but soon learned a different discipline in the Air Force. After his discharge, he headed to Los Angeles and began to make a name for himself behind the scenes as a stuntman when director Robert Clouse used him in an early Jackie Chan film. The gradual steps through film and stunt work allowed him more leverage to choreograph fight scenes and also write in his spare time. His book *Championship Kenpo*, authored with Donnie Williams and Steve Sanders was his first martial arts book written by African-Americans.

However, his devotion to art remained and he formed Nijart International, his own company to encompass the mounting volume of work he had amassed. It allowed him to associate a particular brand name to his style of work.

"I find my inspiration from people and what they do in their daily lives," Nijel said. "I love reading about people and their history."

And it was through his interest of people that prompted him to sculpt detailed, lifelike busts that snatched up public attention. At the same time he brokered commissioned works that would be later featured as awards for celebrities like Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson.

Still, he managed to keep his



horizons broad and didn't let his skin color decide what his hands would create.

"I don't think race matters in art, it just depends on the quality of work, he said. "I don't have to sculpt any other individuals of any other race. I've done a lot of people from different ethnic groups."

But despite the path he had created through his high profile work, his defining moment came after one of the most tumultuous periods in Los Angeles history. After the riots in 1992 Nijel made the decision to use his art as a vehicle of healing and inspiration in the community. He began work on the Mother of Humanity statue and in May 1996 the 16-foot bronze statue was unveiled in Watts, where it now remains at WLCAC (Watts Labor Community Action Committee), 10950 Central Ave..

"The inspiration for the monument came about after the riots. I lived in a pretty diverse community where there were Hispanics,

African Americans, Koreans and whites," he said. "I knew after the riots someone would have tried to do something to patch things together and show what it was really all about. The idea was to put a monument in the community and that's where the Mother of Humanity statue came from.

"A lot of people don't want to admit it, but everybody comes from Africa, he added. "I wanted to place it in six other countries because in those places there was a strong African American presence."

The strong response he received for the Mother of Humanity statue prompted Nijel to want to place replicas of the statue in six other countries (Africa, Australia, Brazil, China, India and Spain) throughout the world. He is now working on finding the best way to arrange for the statues to be in the respective locations.

"The efforts are only hampered by the fact that I am not in those countries," he said.

But he was anxious to mention that officials in Brazil were eager to place the statue at Arcos da Lapa Square in Rio de Janeiro.

Despite the success, Nijel remains concentrated on elevating the rightful place of art in the eyes of the public. But he also hopes that young black people see art as an alterna-

tive to what they are so used to seeing in mainstream society.

It's a form of education he believes all young people should be receiving and notes how few blacks populate the field.

"In the field of art, especially sculpting, I am one of five black sculptors in the California area," he said. "It's just a field where we don't get as much recognition as we should. Our stuff will be here for generations."

"But I want to get us out there; get us on a couple of VIBE magazine covers."

At the end of the day however, it's the dedication and quality of work that determines the impression on leaves on the minds that train their eyes to recognize the beauty of art.

"There's the whole stigma of the 'starving artist' routine," he said. "It does follow you because people expect art for nothing. But it's time, energy, labor and also difficult."

"You have to be creative."

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