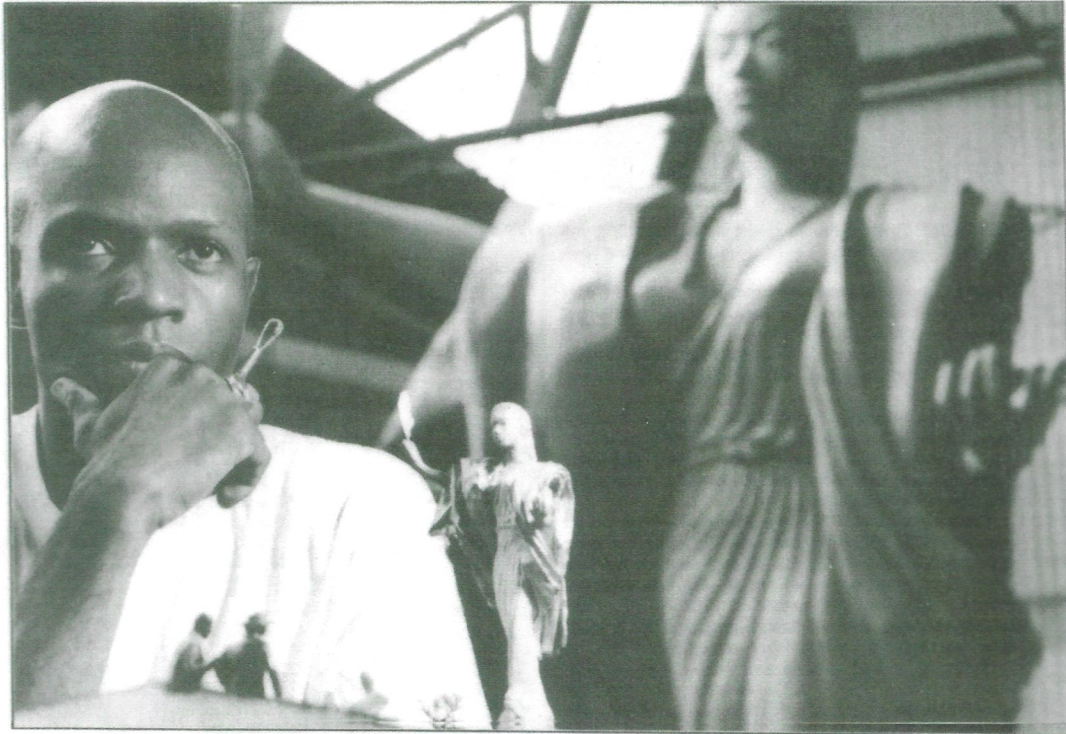


PATT MORRISON



GINA FERAZZI / Los Angeles Times

Artist Nijel with model of his statue, "Mother of Humanity," and the unfinished work itself in background.

## A Statue That Will Stand for Change

The warehouse is the biggest building on the grounds of the Watts Labor Community Action Committee. It survived the rioters who stormed the gates and burned the committee's offices to the ground, looted and put the torch to the coin laundry, the toy store, the chili parlor, the food stamp center and youth center, and chased the group's founders down Central Avenue with guns drawn.

Those were the riots of 1992.

The first riots, the Watts riots, were in 1965, the same year that an assistant secretary of labor named Daniel Patrick Moynihan cautioned that a "tangle of pathology" threatened to destroy the nation's black neighborhoods. It was the year that Ted Watkins Sr. started up the Watts Labor Community Action Committee to find jobs, find housing, keep kids busy, give rides to doctors' offices—the counterweights to pathology.

Watkins was a man of far sight and vast hopes, and to that end he filled this warehouse with anything that might become useful: boxes of plumbing elbows, stiff lassos of wire, pounds and pounds of bolts and bits, boxes of ceramic tile, perhaps the same kind of tile that Simon Rodia used in making the spired and inspired Watts Towers a mile or so away.

The boxes of tiles had to be shoved out of the way so sculptor Nijel Binns would have room to work, and sometimes the people who come to watch him have told him, "The Watts Towers don't represent me but *this*—this represents me."

The Watts Towers appear in the world's art books and guidebooks. Beneath the beams of this corrugated steel warehouse, with the paint coming off in

cobwebby strips, the sculptor Nijel—just Nijel, please—is creating another Watts monument. Right now it is foam and clay. By next year it will be bronze, 16 feet high, and it will show Watts what it could be.

□

Whenever the Beltway boys get up a good head of steam and start chuffing about welfare and illiteracy and illegitimacy, they know—and we know—they're talking about places like Watts.

To the extent that numbers can approximate life, they have a point: Watts is a virtually laboratory-perfect specimen for demographers' scrutiny of poverty. Two out of three people are on welfare, two out of three adults are high school dropouts. In 1990, they earned an average of \$4,500 a year, while everyone else in the county averaged four times that.

How far it is from mainstream, mercantile America can be judged by the trade on Central Avenue: employment training center, welfare office, D.A.'s family and child support unit, Social Security. When there *are* stores—and no shopping center came to Watts until nearly 20 years after the first riots—they are not chain stores, lavish with choice; there may be a wider selection of drug dealers than markets. If you want choice, scan the live chickens caged in front of Turner's, the way that, pier side, you can select your own lobster a million miles away in Santa Monica.

Into this came Nijel, born in London of a Jamaican mother and African American father, educated at a Catholic prep school. He moved to L.A., lived near

USC and wasn't keen on Watts, given all that he'd heard. Now, he knows better. "I don't think the statue would have had as great a relevance anywhere but here. This is the heart of the African American community, here in Watts."

After several years and several designs—a Korean and a black woman in harmony, a peace memorial—this idea took hold, "Mother of Humanity."

She is a black woman whose face bears the marks of every race. It is ironic that the same genetic techniques that met with skepticism and boredom in the Simpson case also unthreaded the spooled DNA of 10,000 generations and traced it back to mankind's common ancestor, a woman who very likely was an African—"the mother of humanity." Nijel's statue bears the feather of peace and righteousness. She is so impressive, Nijel believes, that she will change language, change racial and gender thinking.

"People will have to assess that MF phrase and a lot of other things. Once one can respect their mothers, they can have respect for their wives and daughters . . . this gives the power, the respect back to mothers. That's a powerful idea. We're saying, you're responsible for the children you produce—not the city, not the county, not the schools; you are responsible. They're glad to see the empowerment. . . . In many countries in the world, their power as nurturers, as teachers, is taken away by men." And race, separatism: "It's contrived, it's a game . . . this relieves the burden of racism to see it."

It is a lot to ask from a statue.

It is even more to ask of ourselves.